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Getting Along With Others: An Examination of the Ethnomethodological  
Roots of Preference Organization and its Relationship to Complimenting

William Ronald Boyle

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Aston in Birmingham

October, 1997

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The well-established sociolinguistic literature on complimenting claims that compliments are formulaic (Manes and Wolfson 1981). The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the claim is invalid, to describe an alternative approach to the study of compliments, and to draw on an extensive collection of compliments in order to show that complimenting is a diverse, interactive process. A prerequisite for such work is a means of deciding whether a given utterance is a compliment, but this issue is neglected in the literature. The conversation analytic notion of preference appeared capable of providing this criterion, but research revealed that it was too ill-defined to serve such a purpose. The thesis was, therefore, obliged to clarify the notion of preference before applying it to a study of compliments. The necessary clarification was found in the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis, and the thesis provides a clear and consistent means of determining whether utterances are preferred or dispreferred. The criteria used in the determination of preference are applied, in the final chapter, to the study of compliments. The results of the study contrast markedly with those of the sociolinguistic researchers, and they provide significant grounds for rejecting the claim that compliments are formulaic.

**Key Words:** Ethnomethodology, preference organization, complimenting, conversation analysis, conversational interaction.

## Acknowledgements

I owe debts of gratitude to many people who have helped me in various ways over the past six years. The earliest is to Geoff Lanagan of British Aerospace in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, for introducing me and many others to the Language Studies Unit at Aston University and to an excellent education.

The greatest is to my supervisor, Dr Keith Richards, for his patient and considerate guidance over a very long period of time. His enthusiasm for conversation analysis and his insights into the subject have proved highly motivating and instructive. I have benefited enormously from his advice and his teaching.

I am grateful for help provided by Librarians at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok and at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. My colleagues also deserve thanks; particularly Alex Henry for the interest he has shown in this work and the encouragement he has offered; Hamish McIlwraith for his unstinting help with my computer problems; and Dr Bob Roseberry for his advice about genre.

Finally, I thank my parents and my wife for more things than I can recount or even remember. Their confidence in my ability to complete this work has been a great source of encouragement.

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# Chapter One

## 1. Introduction

This thesis is a study of the relationship between ethnomethodology and conversation analysis and of how that relationship can clarify our understanding of the concept of preference organization. This is a concept which should be central to the study of conversation analysis, but which has become increasingly marginal because of the confusion and doubt that surround it. A decade or more ago, it figured prominently in the work of Atkinson and Drew (1979), Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Heritage (1984a), Levinson (1983), and Pomerantz (1978, 1984), but in recent important publications it has received only the briefest of mentions (Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Drew and Heritage 1992; Firth 1995; ten Have and Psathas 1995). The purpose of this thesis is to explain the decline of the concept, to clarify its meaning, to establish its importance, and to describe the contribution that it can make to English language teaching.

The thesis was motivated by an interest in compliments (Chen 1993; Herbert 1989, 1991; Herbert and Straight 1989; Holmes 1988a, 1988b; Manes 1983; Manes and Wolfson 1981; Wolfson 1981, 1983) and in particular by Pomerantz's (1978) work on compliments and responses. Unlike much of the other work on compliments, which relies on data that researchers hear and note down or on data obtained in experimental circumstances, Pomerantz (*ibid.*) examined tape-recorded examples of naturally-occurring talk in certain speech communities in the United States. She



reveals the ways in which actors respond to compliments and she describes how the responses are designed as either 'preferred' or 'dispreferred' responses. Such work appeared to have considerable pedagogical value for courses in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and EFL. As no similar work had been done in the United Kingdom, the interest in the work of Pomerantz (1978) and others resulted in a study of compliments paid and responded to by British speakers of English, and that was to have been the core of this thesis.

However, it also resulted in questions about the nature of compliments and about the meaning of preference. Manes and Wolfson (1981) and others treat compliments as unproblematic utterances, and as something that an undergraduate researcher can identify without difficulty.

As part of a seminar in sociolinguistics, students who had little or no background in this discipline were asked to contribute to our data by collecting compliments in everyday speech situations. It is noteworthy that the students, naive native speakers, did not ask that compliments be described or defined for them and indicated no confusion concerning what was expected of them. The data which they collected, with almost no exceptions, were unambiguously identifiable as compliments (*ibid.*:127).

The compliments that the students collected were overheard and noted down, rather than tape-recorded, and it seems to be the case that they paid little or no attention to the response to the 'compliment.' In attempting to replicate this research, it became clear that one requires a means of identifying an utterance as a compliment, and that it is not adequate to say, as Manes and Wolfson (*ibid.*:116) do, that a compliment is an expression of positive evaluation that must include at least one term which carries

positive semantic load. This sort of definition is inadequate because one must also consider the response to the 'compliment,' since compliments do misfire. An individual might offer an evaluation which she regards as complimentary, but the recipient of that evaluation might be disappointed with it and might feel that it is inadequate, and an example of just such an occurrence is presented and discussed in Chapter 5, section 2. Thus, from a conversation analytic perspective, an utterance would not be described as a compliment if the recipient were to treat the utterance as something other than a compliment. The sociolinguistic approach to the study of compliments, as represented by Manes and Wolfson (1981), does not confront this problem, in large part, perhaps, because the ethnographic method of data collection makes it difficult for researchers to capture anything other than short and uncomplicated utterances, as Section Five of this Chapter will explain.

The researcher who wished to understand the manner in which conversation analysts study compliments and the criteria they employ in arguing that a given utterance is or is not a compliment, in so far as such a thing can be established, would turn to Pomerantz (1978) for enlightenment, because hers is the work to which all conversation analysts who are interested in complimenting refer. That researcher, however, would find, as this writer did, that Pomerantz (1978) describes and illustrates two preferences that speakers orient to in responding to compliments, but that she offers no criteria for determining whether a given utterance is preferred or dispreferred. Hence, although it is essential to have a definition of preference in order to describe an utterance as preferred or dispreferred, it is not to be found in the work of the conversation analyst most closely connected with the compliment sequence.



Recourse to the secondary literature of conversation analysis and discourse analysis (Cook 1989; Coulthard 1985; Heritage 1984a; Levinson 1983; Mey 1993; Taylor and Cameron 1987) revealed that no clear, consistent, or reliable account of preference organization was available, and that no utterance could therefore be described, in a principled way, as preferred or dispreferred. The solution adopted by this thesis was to return to the primary sources of conversation analysis, the lectures of Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b), and to the phenomenological and ethnomethodological roots of the subject (Schutz 1962a, 1962b; Garfinkel 1967), and to seek an understanding of preference in those sources. Hence, the focus of the work moved from compliments to preference organization, via conversation analysis and ethnomethodology. The pedagogical importance of this progression is that it provides a sound theoretical basis for the critique of existing approaches to the study of compliments, and for the justification, in Chapter Five, of both the conversation analytic approach and the quite different findings that will be presented in that chapter.

The introduction will begin, therefore, by providing a brief account of ethnomethodology and preference organization, and it will show that the doubt and confusion surrounding preference organization stem from widely known and highly respected texts. It will also show that as the sources of confusion have not been challenged, a flawed version of preference has become established in the literature of discourse analysis and applied linguistics. It will argue that researchers who have recognized the flaw have either employed the concept of preference in a restricted manner or have abandoned it. The introduction will mention the pedagogical problems that have arisen as a result of employing a flawed model of preference. It will then explain that the remedy proposed

by this thesis for the problem of preference organization is to revive the concept by linking it firmly to its ethnomethodological roots. Finally, the introduction will state that the thesis will provide a clear, consistent, and reliable account of the concept of preference; that the effectiveness of the concept will be demonstrated in a range of contexts unimagined by the reader of Levinson (1983); and that the concept will be used to re-examine existing work on compliments.

### ***1.1 Ethnomethodology***

Ethnomethodology is of central importance to this thesis and it is the study of the methods that individuals employ to manage their everyday affairs in concert with others and in ever-changing circumstances. Harold Garfinkel (1967:173) compares the circumstances in which a person conducts her everyday affairs to the tip of an iceberg. He suggests that only one-tenth of any situation in which she is acting is visible, but that she treats the invisible nine-tenths as an unquestioned and unquestionable background of matters that are relevant to her calculations, and that she takes that background for granted. The metaphor of the iceberg is of value to this thesis in two ways. Firstly, it reminds us that the greater part of the activity that constitutes routine, mundane achievements is 'seen but unnoticed' (Garfinkel 1967:36), and that ethnomethodology is concerned with revealing the extraordinary nature of those unnoticed, commonplace events. Secondly, it accurately reflects the current view of preference organization, which is one that concentrates on two or three prominent characteristics of the concept while ignoring the great, submerged mass of unnoticed uses of preference organization.



## **1.2 Preference and its flaws**

Sacks (1987:55-56) introduces preference in the following way.

If a party does, for example, a first pair part of some type, such as a greeting, question, offer, request, compliment, complaint, things like that, then the party who is going to do a second pair part to that first pair part picks it from the sorts of alternatives that fit the type. Then for greetings this involves greetings, for questions, various sorts of answers; for offers, acceptances and rejections; for announcements, congratulations and condolences; and so on. Now, of course, for any given first pair part, there may be a bunch more second pair parts that can be introduced; but it is enough to say that for most of the adjacency pair types, there are alternatives in the second pair slot. For some, you pretty much have to do a given thing, but for most of them there are alternatives. That is to say, having been given an offer, you can do either an acceptance or a rejection, and both of them are 'legal'. Some other things are also legal, but we are not worrying about that right now.

Sacks (1992a, 1992b) explains elsewhere that the 'legal' action is the 'preferred' action and that the 'illegal' action is the 'dispreferred.' However, the problem for researchers interested in preference organization is how to say with some degree of certainty that a given action or response is 'legal' or 'illegal,' because Sacks did not live long enough to make all of his innovations explicit. With the publication of his "Collected Lectures" in 1992, however, it became possible to discover what Sacks meant by the concept, although few researchers appear, as yet, to have made use of this valuable resource.

Despite the lack of clarity surrounding preference, the concept appears in most of the older texts in the field of conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Button and Lee 1987; Roger and Bull 1989), but not in the newer ones (Boden and

Zimmerman 1991; Drew and Heritage 1992; Firth 1995; ten Have and Psathas 1995). It is still discussed, however, in many texts in discourse analysis that deal with talk (Cook 1989; Coulthard 1985; Levinson 1983; Mey 1993; Nunan 1993; Schiffrrin 1994; Tsui 1994; Yule 1996), but it is almost always used in the truncated form suggested above.

In the past fifteen years, most of those who have written about preference have acknowledged their debt to Levinson (1983), the author of perhaps the most detailed account of preference organization in existence. In fact, Levinson's (1983) work is so remarkably knowledgable and persuasive that it is generally accepted as definitive, and this has had the unfortunate effect of inhibiting discussion of the concept. Instead of asking how preference operates in this situation or that situation, it seems quite acceptable simply to quote from Levinson (1983). This would be a satisfactory state of affairs if Levinson's (1983) virtuoso account were indeed definitive, but this thesis will show that what Levinson (1983) does is *not* to provide a comprehensive description of preference organization, but rather to highlight one interesting feature of preference, to list a pattern of actions and preferred responses, and to introduce a methodological *non-sequitur* that traps the unwary reader.

The thesis will show, in Section 3.5, that those researchers in applied linguistics and EFL who have attempted to apply the existing account of preference to their own data have produced work that is confused and confusing. This thesis contends, in fact, that unless a researcher works within the very narrow areas described by Levinson (1983), it is not possible to employ Levinson's (1983) account of preference, because he does



not present an adequate criterion for describing an action as preferred or dispreferred. It also argues that the presentation of a flawed model of preference has inhibited research and has led to a fossilization of the concept in the literature of EFL and discourse analysis (Cook 1989; Mey 1993; Nunan 1993; Yule 1996).

### *1.2.1 Markedness*

The interesting feature of preference that Levinson (1983) identifies, and the first of his three contributions to the discussion of preference, is the association of preference with markedness. This, it will be seen, was not an original idea, but one that Levinson (1983:332-336) developed in a more skilful manner than had hitherto been done. He claims, in effect, that preferred responses are unmarked, linguistically, and that they appear in structurally simpler turns than the linguistically marked, dispreferred turns, which are frequently accompanied by delays, prefaces, and accounts.

What Levinson (1983) does not point out, however, is that markedness is not a criterial feature of preference, but rather an occasional feature of preference in certain actions, and that an action can, in fact, be marked and preferred or unmarked and dispreferred. This will be seen in Section 3.5.1, where the work of Taylor (1994) will illustrate the consequences of identifying markedness with preference. Chapter Four will then present data and analyses to substantiate the claim that an action can be identified as preferred or dispreferred, regardless of whether it is marked or unmarked. Despite the flawed nature of Levinson's (1983) account of preference, the neatness of the argument that he presents has considerable pedagogical appeal and it has been

accepted by the authors of many texts in discourse analysis (Cook 1989; Coulthard 1985; Mey 1993; Nunan 1993; Tsui 1994; Yule 1996), and by some conversation analysts (Ahrens 1997; Drew 1990; Hayashi 1996; Kotthoff 1993). This thesis will argue, however, that because Levinson's (1983) account is so elegant and persuasive, it has led others to over-emphasize and distort the importance of markedness. It will argue, in fact, that the tip of the iceberg has come to represent the iceberg itself, and that the existence of the submerged nine-tenths of the concept has been quite overlooked. It will also suggest that a fuller understanding of this submerged element may be of significant pedagogical value.

### *1.2.2 The pattern of actions and responses*

The second of Levinson's (1983) three contributions to the discussion of preference organization is his description of a pattern of preferred and dispreferred responses to a small number of actions. This pattern of actions and responses is presented in the table below, and the pattern appears, as does markedness, to be pedagogically useful, in so far as it shows what the preferred and dispreferred responses to requests, offers, assessments and other actions are (Levinson 1983:336).



# Correlations of content and format in adjacency pair seconds

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FIRST PARTS:	Request	Offer / invite	Assessment	Question	Blame
SECOND PARTS:					
<i>Preferred:</i>	acceptance	acceptance	agreement	expected answer	denial
<i>Dispreferred:</i>	refusal	refusal	disagreement	unexpected answer or non-answer	admission

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The fact that this table is referred to widely and with approval indicates the importance that many researchers and teachers attach to it, but this thesis will show how limited its application really is and it will argue that the very existence of such a table militates against a clearer understanding of preference organization, because it ignores the indexical properties of utterances. Instead of encouraging research into preference organization, Levinson's (1983) table provides a somewhat simplistic picture of the relationship between preferred and dispreferred responses. It has also encouraged the belief that there are certain preferred and dispreferred responses to any given action and that the task of revealing these responses is not unduly difficult. Thus, the shape of the archetypal visible iceberg is taken to represent the shape of every iceberg that has existed and might exist, regardless of the circumstances of its appearance.

### 1.2.3 'Face': a methodological non-sequitur

Levinson (1983) has also introduced, as suggested earlier, a third beguiling element into the debate, and it is one that has proved perhaps more popular, tenacious, and distracting than linguistic markedness and the list of recurrent patterns of preferred and dispreferred actions. The distraction that Levinson (1983) has introduced is the notion of 'face,' and, given the importance of Levinson's work on face and politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), it is hardly surprising that he should do so. Thus, instead of examining data in order to determine *how* preference operates, Levinson (1983) has promoted that idea that preference can be understood by considering *why* individuals behave as they do, and he has found support in Cameron (1990), Heritage (1984a), and Taylor and Cameron (1987), among others. Cameron (1990:225) argues that

Motivating preference systems in the way that Heritage and other analysts do, by invoking what is essentially a functional explanation in terms of face-maintenance and minimisation of conflict, seems to me a useful move: the argument in my view is entirely persuasive.

Cameron (*ibid.*) is undoubtedly correct in describing the functional, face-maintenance argument as persuasive, because many students and textbook writers have indeed been persuaded by the case presented by Levinson (1983) and others. However, she does not explain how such an argument is useful in determining whether a particular action is preferred or dispreferred. Instead of asking what a preferred or dispreferred action is, she accepts that disagreements or rejections are dispreferred because they are face-threatening, and she does so despite the obvious fact that there are situations

in which actors make it very clear that a rejection or a refusal of their offer or request is the 'preferred' response in the technical sense of the term. Actors routinely reject offers of help from people who are perhaps busier than themselves, or older or less able than themselves, and such a rejection is entirely 'legal' in Sacks' (1987:55-56) terms. Hence, preference is something that is determined in a given interaction according to the understandings displayed by the interactants, and not something that can be specified in advance. It is this decontextualized specification of 'preferred' and 'dispreferred' actions and responses that has proved such a handicap to the wider understanding and use of Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) valuable concept.

The primary effect of the psychological argument of Cameron (1990) and others, therefore, is to distract attention from the discussion of *how* preference works and to delay the achievement of an understanding of the concept of preference. It is for this reason that the introduction of 'face' into the debate about preference is described as a methodological *non-sequitur*. 'Face' simply has nothing whatsoever to do with *how* actors show that a given action is preferred or dispreferred, or how the analyst can determine such a fact from the study of an audio-tape or a video-tape or a transcript.

### **1.3 The problem of preference**

Despite the problems referred to above, Levinson's virtuosity and authority are such that his account of preference organization remains unchallenged more than a decade later (Mey 1993; Nunan 1993; Tsui 1994; Yule 1996). This lack of an overt challenge should not, however, be construed as acceptance of the work of Levinson and his



successors, because doubts about the meaning and status of the concept of preference have been expressed in recent publications. In listing the sequential features of conversation analysis, Firth (1995:25) questions the status of preference by placing that word alone in inverted commas: "turns, repair, 'preference,' pre-sequences, adjacency relations;" and Mazeland *et al.* (1995:292) talk of "the difficult concept of 'preference'."

The concept of preference as it stands is not only difficult to understand, but there is no readily available source of understanding to which the student can turn. Apart from Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Heritage (1984a), Levinson (1983), Pomerantz (1978, 1984), and Taylor and Cameron (1987), who, among others, are responsible for the perceived 'difficulty' of the concept, the interested researcher who tapped 'preference' and 'conversation analysis' into a database would find herself directed either to the work of Bilmes (1988), and thereby to even greater difficulty and confusion, or to Ahrens (1997), Kotthoff (1993), Li Wei and Milroy (1995), Norrick (1991), and Taylor (1994), and a restatement of Levinson's (1983) position. The solution for many, therefore, appears to be to make the best of what is available in Levinson (1983) or to avoid the concept altogether. However, this thesis will demonstrate that the reader who does have a need to understand the concept of preference, rather than simply to refer to it in passing, will not find the answer in Levinson (1983). It will also demonstrate, in Chapter 3, Section 5, that those who base their understanding of preference on this work, and related work, and who employ it in a significant way in their research have a good chance of producing work that is superficial or confused (Greenleaf and Freedman 1993; Norrick 1991; Taylor 1994).

## **1.4 The ethnomethodological solution**

The inevitable question, therefore, is that if Levinson (1983) and other discourse analysts have not presented an entirely reliable account of preference organization, who or what can provide such a thing? The answer that this thesis offers is that a confident understanding is to be found in the hidden nine-tenths of the iceberg, or rather in the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis. This may appear to be a very obvious solution, because texts about conversation analysis frequently begin by acknowledging the link between ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Heritage and Atkinson 1984; Roger and Bull 1989; ten Have 1990). However, the reader who notices such a connection and wonders how the ethnomethodological notions of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, or the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives will be employed to 'ground' an analysis of conversational data is invariably disappointed, because the link is generally a nominal one. It is rarely exemplified or developed (Clayman and Maynard 1995:27), but this thesis will argue that if preference is to be explained, then the connection between ethnomethodology and conversation analysis must be made explicit. Hence, the purpose of the thesis is, firstly, to explain that connection and to show that ethnomethodology can provide a convincing account of preference organization; and, secondly, to demonstrate the pedagogical benefits of such an understanding.

Chapter One will end with a description of the methodology employed in identifying and collecting the data that will be used, in Chapter Five, to illustrate the pedagogical benefits referred to above. Chapter Two will begin by describing the 'ethno' methods

of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives, and it will explain their value in explicating mundane actions and their importance in conversation analysis. It will also outline the influence of the work of Erving Goffman and of the ethnography of communication on conversation analysis. The 'ethno' methods will then be employed, in Chapter Three, to demonstrate the shortcomings of existing accounts and applications of the concept of preference. The importance and relevance of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives will, however, become substantially more apparent in Chapter Four when the lectures of Harvey Sacks will be discussed and analyzed, and when Sacks' own use of the concept of preference will be revealed. Preference will be shown to be not only more central to conversation analysis than the current literature suggests, but also more varied, more interesting, and of greater analytical value. Chapter Four will remove the confusion that surrounds the concept of preference, and it will provide a clear, consistent, and reliable means of determining whether an action is preferred or dispreferred. It will also provide numerous extracts from the data collected for this thesis in order to illustrate the operation of preference and to exemplify the method of data analysis employed in the ethnomethodological form of conversation analysis. The final chapter will bring the thesis full circle by using the newly elaborated concept of preference to examine the substantial body of work on compliments and to reveal, through the presentation of a wide range of data, that compliments are not as formulaic as Wolfson and Manes' (1981:127) 'naive native speakers' were led to believe. This discussion will have implications for the way in which speech acts are studied and taught in EFL and applied linguistics.



## 1.5 *An outline of the methodology*

Harvey Sacks (1984), like many other sociologists, noted that society is orderly, but he sought to explain that orderliness by examining what sociology had neglected to study. He focused on the innumerable, and seemingly insignificant, mundane actions that constitute this orderliness, and he asked how these actions are organized and how they contribute to a sense that an orderly society exists. He saw that

it is perhaps not incidental that people have not devoted their lives to studying sentences like "I had a good breakfast this morning" or "How are you?" There are more or less defensible reasons for not studying such sentences (*Ibid.*:24).

However, he argued that

a detailed study of small phenomena may give an enormous understanding of the way humans do things and the kinds of objects they use to construct and order their affairs (*Ibid.*).

The problem for ethnomethodology and conversation analysis was to discover the devices or mechanisms that actors employ in this work, and Sacks' (1984:26) fortuitous solution was to select an audio-recording of naturally occurring talk for research 'simply because I could get my hands on it and study it again and again.' As talk is fundamental to human social organization, Sacks (*Ibid.*) realized that the 'seen but unnoticed' (Garfinkel 1967:44) mechanisms of social organization could be identified by means of the language used to instantiate them. The consequent commitment of conversation analysts to the study of audio- or video-recorded talk is quite exceptional in the social sciences and it means, as ten Have (1990:25) says, that

favoured sources of data, such as interviews, observation, idealized or invented examples, or experiments are not used, because they are seen as 'too much a product of the researcher's or informant's manipulation, selection, or reconstruction, based on preconceived notions of what is probable or important' (*ibid.*).

Stubbs (1983:220) applauds such a choice, because he believes that

any analysis of speech behaviour will ultimately stand or fall on its success in coming to grips with audio-recordings of what speakers actually say to each other in specific, naturally occurring social settings.

The use of tape-recorded data not only enables '*repeated and detailed* examination of events in interaction' to be undertaken (Heritage and Atkinson 1984:4), but it also allows other researchers the opportunity to examine the data and to evaluate the analysis, and this public evaluation of its data is an exceptional feature of conversation analysis. This section will offer only a brief account of the methodology of conversation analysis, but detailed accounts will appear in Chapters 2.2, 5.1.1, and 5.1.2 below.

### *1.5.1 Data collection*

This thesis has the dual purpose of, on the one hand, explaining what preference organization is and of demonstrating how it works, and, on the other hand, of showing that conversation analysis in general and preference organization in particular can provide a much richer understanding of the nature and extent of complimenting than sociolinguistic research can provide. As a result, it was necessary to collect two sets



of data. The first was collected in order to illustrate the operation of preference organization, and extracts from this data set appear in Chapter Four. The second set was collected for the purpose of exemplifying the richer and more diverse picture of complimenting that conversation analysis depicts, and extracts from this set appear in Chapter Five.

The audio- and video-recordings of naturally-occurring talk that form the basis of this thesis represent a number of speech exchange systems. One is talk among friends and family; a second is talk among colleagues at work; a third is talk on phone-in programmes on radio stations in the United Kingdom and Malaysia; and the fourth is interviews on radio stations in the aforementioned countries, and interviews, discussions, and sports commentaries broadcast over the Star Television network in South-east Asia.

The reasons for collecting data in this range of speech exchange systems were both principled and practical. On the one hand, there was a need to obtain as wide a range of data as possible, and on the other hand there was a need to obtain data that was clear enough to be analyzed and transcribed. It was important to have a wide range in order to ensure that the process of data collection would not be unduly influenced by preconceptions about the likely value of certain sources, as ten Have (1990:25) cautions. One of the preconceptions that particularly interests Schegloff (1991) is that talk in 'institutional contexts' is often seen as 'institutional talk,' whereas, in fact, just because talk is taking place in a hospital does not necessarily make it 'medical talk' or 'institutional talk.' Schegloff (*Ibid.*) argues that it is the analyst's responsibility to demonstrate how the setting in which the talk takes place, e.g. a classroom, a school

staffroom, or a radio studio, is relevant for the participants or is procedurally consequential for them. He explains how actors constitute different forms of talk within a given setting (*ibid.*), and Seedhouse (1996) demonstrates the consequences of assuming that a given form of interaction is characteristic of the classroom setting, and he describes the patterns of interaction that teachers and students constitute in different 'classroom modes.'

Although this research began with the assumption of the uniformity of behaviour within a given speech exchange system that Schegloff (1991) warns against, it gradually became clear that examples of conversational talk occur not only among friends and family, but also in the classroom, in service encounters, in formal meetings, in radio and television broadcasts, and in settings of all kinds. The objective, therefore, became the need to find examples of preferred and dispreferred actions and responses and examples of compliments wherever they might be constituted, rather than examples of these actions in 'conversation,' 'on talk radio' or in some other setting.

In view of the orientation of this thesis towards EFL and Applied Linguistics, one important practical consideration was that the data should be collected from sources that students who were studying discourse analysis at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam could also collect from, and not from sources, such as doctor-patient interaction or talk in certain institutional settings, to which they might not have access. In addition, the accessible sources should not be ones that might cause the students embarrassment, ethical problems, or any other difficulties.



Collection of data among friends might be easy for many students, but such data can sometimes be heavily deictic, or 'indexical' to use Garfinkel's (1967) preferred term, and may not provide very clear illustrations. Pomerantz (1984) uses one particular data extract of talk among friends a number of times, and while there is little doubt that it represents a self-deprecation and a response to a self-deprecation, some of the details of the interaction are obscure to this reader.

- A: hhh I can't say anything, I'm stupid, er uh 'f I think uh- the-f-uh-sump'n about a ma:n er the gover'ment yihknow, I uh- hhh Oh well it's me too Portia, hh yihknow I'm no bottle a' milk.  
(0.6)
- B: Oh:: well yer easy tuh get along with, but I know he's that way. God, jist tuh go out fishin with im w'd- drives me up a wa:ll,  
(*Ibid.*:82).

Talk among close friends can therefore pose problems to outsiders, while talk among colleagues can be inhibited by circumstances.

Public talk about mundane matters is less indexical than private talk, and recordings can be made freely, repeatedly, for as long as the researcher wishes, without normally having to ask permission, and without embarrassment. These are important practical considerations for students, few of whom would have the confidence and determination of a Deborah Tannen (1984:32) or her consequent willingness to carry a tape recorder with her everywhere. Thus, one important objective of this thesis is to demonstrate that, if private sources of data are not easily accessible to students, a rich variety of data can still be obtained from public sources. The most obvious of these public sources is radio and television stations, and in particular radio phone-in programmes or programmes with phone-in components. Such programmes are

growing in popularity in the United Kingdom (Hutchby 1991) and also in Malaysia. The talk on these phone-in programmes is a valuable source of data and this thesis has made considerable use of such talk.

The speech exchange system of talk radio differs from that of mundane conversation in a number of important respects (Heritage 1985a; Hutchby 1991). The turn-taking system is unlike that of conversation, because turns are controlled by a radio programme presenter. Restrictions are also placed on the length of time that a caller can speak and on the topics that he or she can address. Hence, the interaction between caller and talk radio presenter involves little or none of the negotiation that is characteristic of everyday conversation, and this is particularly evident in the abrupt way in which calls on talk radio are often ended (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). The way in which preference operates in such a speech exchange system, however, is determined by applying the 'ethno' methods of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives to a given string of utterances, and not by assuming that preferred and dispreferred actions can be learnt from a table of actions and responses.

Having located a public supply of good data, the student needs to ensure that the quality of the recording is sufficient to allow transcription and analysis to take place. Although many hours of talk on phone-in programmes on Radio Four in Malaysia were recorded for this thesis, only one or two extracts have in fact been included. The reason for this is that the quality of the phone lines in Malaysia and the softness of many callers' voices make adequate transcription a considerable problem. While the



local resource of Malaysian radio stations may not be very accessible to a non-Malay speaking and non-Chinese speaking foreigner, this thesis will argue that it is of considerable value to learners in South-east Asia, because their ears are far better attuned to the nuances of local pronunciation and local language use, and they have the ability to transcribe local English utterances that the foreigner cannot transcribe.

A further public source of talk in English for students in South-east Asia is the Star Television network, because the quality of the signal means that it is possible to record talk that is sufficiently loud and clear. Once having made an audible recording, the researcher then has the secondary, yet very substantial, problem of transcribing the recordings, and this problem will be discussed briefly below. Before moving on to the subject of transcription, however, it should be said that the use of data from all of the four sources described above serves, to some extent, as a process of triangulation (Stubbs 1983:234-237). There are mechanisms and features that may be constrained in one speech exchange system and unconstrained in another, or actions that may be realized in a particular way in one but in a different way in another, and this will be demonstrated in Chapter Five with the example of compliments and responses to compliments. However, the cross-checking of observations and analyses in one speech exchange system with those in another is a means of attempting to validate the findings. ten Have (1990:34) makes this point rather more clearly when he says that

an analysis in [conversation analysis] is always comparative, either directly or indirectly. The idea is that the devices used to recognize and produce a particular instance are similar to those used in many others.

### 1.5.2 Data coding

All of the data extracts used in the thesis are preceded by a form of identification. This consists of four parts and they locate the source, the speech exchange system, the year of the recording, and the audio-tape or video-tape number. Hence, [C:C:97:69:2] means Colleagues, Conversation, 1997, tape 69, side 2. The third and fourth categories are generally straightforward, and perhaps the only explanation that is required is that some tape numbers are preceded by the letter 'V' meaning 'video,' while others are preceded by an 'N' meaning 'new'. When the collection of audio tapes had exceeded one hundred, some confusion crept into the numbering system, with some tapes being assigned the same number. This small problem was solved by establishing a parallel set with the prefix 'N'. The meaning of letters used for the first category is as follows:

#### Source

FF:	Family and friends
C:	Colleagues
RT:	BBC Radio Two
RF:	BBC Radio Four
R5:	BBC Radio Five
RS:	BBC Radio Solent
TR:	Talk Radio UK
MR:	Malaysian Radio Four
CR:	Capital Radio, London
WSTV:	BBC World Service Television
STV:	Star Television Network

Capital Radio, London, is a source of phone-in data because it is received in Brunei by courtesy of a member of the Royal Family. Although it is a disorientating

experience to sit in a small restaurant in Brunei and listen to a voice urging motorists to avoid Hoe Street in Walthamstow or the south side of Clapham Common, Capital Radio is nevertheless another source of talk of which students in Brunei can and do make use.

From the sources above, recordings were made of talk that occurred in the following speech exchange systems.

Speech exchange system

C:	Conversation
PI:	Talk on a radio phone-in programme
I:	Interview
TI:	Telephone interview
SCY:	Sports Commentary

Although 'interview' is perhaps too general a term to describe a speech exchange system, the indexical circumstances of each data extract are described in the thesis, with the result that the appropriate genre of an interview, for example, is made clear.

### *1.5.3 Data transcription*

Conversation analysts not only listen to audio- and video-recordings in search of a 'candidate phenomenon' (Moerman 1988:36), but they also transcribe the talk, because the transcription 'can allow us to see ways in which conversation is ordered which we would never imagine just by thinking about it' (Stubbs 1983:20). The act of transcription is slow and painstaking, and this thesis has, like other works in



conversation analysis, relied on the conventions established by Jefferson (1988). The system was modified, however, in order to reach a compromise between accuracy and readability. The transcription symbols employed are adapted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984:ix-xvi) and are as follows:

1. The use of square brackets indicates simultaneous or overlapping utterances.

A: Yes but come on [you didn't]  
B: [I have an] audience for what I do=

2. An equals sign is used when there is no discernible gap between one speaker's utterance and that of another speaker.

A: There there's one very Andrews Sisterish (.) track=  
B: =Smoke Dreams smoke dreams yeh ...

3. When an interval in the stream of talk is too short to be measured, it is shown as a full stop within parentheses:

A: Then you were released a (.) came to Heathrow ...

When the interval can be measured, it is done so following what Jefferson (1988:166) calls the 'method favoured by amateur photographers, simply mumbling 'no one thousand, one one thousand, two one thousand ...' ' (Jefferson 1988:166). The intervals are measured in units of half a second, because that seems to be about as accurate as one can get with this method.

A: That's what I said to you the oth the other week (1.5) we went past somewhere (2.0) oh we went past ...

4. A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable that it follows:

A: A Carling Black label=  
B: =No:::

5. Underlining indicates emphasis.

A: And away comes Tait and Wood is going like an express train to take on (Garvie) the prop (.) Joubert will get there first ...



6. Capital letters are used to indicate an utterance that is spoken much louder than the surrounding talk.

A: Ah::::: yeh YOU'RE GOING SWIMMING DID YOU SAY?

7. Inhalations (hhh) are inserted in the text where they occur.

A: hhh now you've been around for a fair (.) length of time ...

8. Double parentheses are used to provide some information about the text.

B: Well that's very worrying=they say I'm a gay icon but really I was just a hopeless case and=

A: =(laughs))

9. Single parentheses are used when there is some doubt about the transcription of an utterance or when it is not possible to transcribe it at all.

B: It's not all (pumped) up=

A: =No no no=

B: =there's ( ) no perm and she doesn't want .....

Exercises in transcription are valuable for the student, because they show that person just how remarkable the organization and timing of talk in a conversation is, and they also demonstrate that skill in the conduct of conversation can transcend age, gender, social class, educational level, and other social factors. For students who might equate skill in conversation with content knowledge, the study of mundane conversation holds the possibility of inducing a reappraisal of the conversational ability of others. This is because practice in transcription and the study of conversation reveal not only the mechanisms and timing of talk, but also the actions that are performed through talk. Such an analysis can show that a person who might be disparaged for never having much to say has, in fact, chosen to perform preferred actions. Instead of talking a lot, the person might be active in conversational management and might be occupied in contributing to the 'seen but unnoticed' mechanisms that make conversation orderly

and successful. This thesis will argue that there is an insufficient understanding of what a preferred action is and how it is performed, and it will demonstrate that the individual whose actions are consistently preferred possesses real skill and deserves respect and recognition, regardless of the content of that person's talk.

## Chapter Two

### 2. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

This Chapter will begin by offering a brief description of ethnomethodology, and it will then outline and illustrate the key ethnomethodological concepts of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives, because they will be employed throughout the thesis. It will also show their relevance to conversation analysis and to language teaching during the course of the review. The connection between ethnomethodology and conversation analysis is widely acknowledged in the literature (Atkinson and Drew 1979; Bilmes 1985, 1995; Button 1991; Cameron 1990; Clayman and Maynard 1995; Czyzewski 1989; Heritage 1984a, 1987, 1989; Maynard and Clayman 1991; Molotch and Boden 1985; Schegloff 1986; Taylor and Cameron 1987; ten Have 1990). However, as this thesis will show, it is rare for conversation analysts to make explicit use of ethnomethodological notions in their analysis of data, and it will be argued that conversation analysis is a less effective discipline as a result. Having considered that connection, the Chapter will then recount the divergent directions that conversation analytic studies have taken over the past twenty years, and it will assess the influence that related fields, such as symbolic interactionism and the ethnography of communication, have had on conversation analysis. Finally, it will review the literature on preference organization and will show how the failure to attend to the ethnomethodological roots of the subject has resulted in a situation in which the concept is misunderstood and neglected.



## 2.1 Ethnomethodology

Despite the 'enormous range of ethnomethodological research from the past three decades' (Maynard and Clayman 1991:385), ethnomethodology is not a field that is well known to language teachers. This is in large part due to the inaccessibility of the language used by ethnomethodologists. When Garfinkel (1967) is describing his research projects, such as the study of Agnes, the 'intersexed' person (Garfinkel 1967:116-185), his work is lucid and absorbing. When he is discussing theoretical issues in ethnomethodology, however, the writing is formidably abstract, and he appears to have established a standard of obscurity that most ethnomethodologists seem compelled to follow. The difficulty of his prose can be inferred from the title of Garfinkel (1988), which is one of his later articles: "Evidence for locally produced, naturally accountable phenomena of order\*<sup>1</sup>, logic, reason, meaning, method, etc. in and as of the essential quiddity of immortal ordinary society, (I of IV): *An announcement of studies*<sup>2</sup>".

Ethnomethodology is a term coined by Harold Garfinkel (1974) as a result of insights he developed during a short stay at the University of Chicago. He recounts that he was invited by one Fred Strodbeck to work on a study of the behaviour of jurors in Wichita, Kansas. Strodbeck had planted microphones in the jurors' room and Garfinkel spent a few months listening to their tape-recorded deliberations and trying to determine what made them *members of a jury*, as opposed to *members of a small group*.

The tape-recording of the jury's deliberations led Garfinkel (1967, 1974) to observe that while the jurors went about their work with the utmost seriousness and with the highest regard for the law, they nevertheless employed 'some kind of knowledge of the way in which the organized affairs of the society operated - knowledge that they drew on easily, that they required of each other' (Garfinkel 1974:15). This was knowledge of the methods, by means of which, 'somehow or other in their dealings with each other they managed, if you will permit me to use it, to see' (*Ibid.*:17). What they were able to see was that someone was fair or reasonable or inconsistent or suspicious or whatever, and they were able to see this because they possessed an 'ethno' ability, or rather the common-sense knowledge of society that is available to any competent member. They applied this 'members' knowledge' when deciding, for example, whether a witness was credible or whether an action was fair or unfair.

As these methods are common-sense methods, they are also methods that are taken for granted. Ordinary members are aware of the methods, but they are not explicitly invoked, and so they are 'seen but unnoticed' (Garfinkel 1967:36). Ethnomethodology therefore became a study of the explication of common-sense knowledge and of practical reasoning, of how social actors create and sustain a sense that the social world has a real character. It is concerned with discovering 'how a sense of social order is possible' (Mehan and Wood 1975:190), and the next section of this thesis will describe and illustrate four of the methods that members employ in creating a sense of a world in common. Those methods are indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives. Reflexivity will receive greater attention than the other three methods, because it is described as



a much misunderstood concept in ethnomethodology (Cuff et al. 1985; Leiter 1980:183).

### 2.1.1 Indexicality

Of all the principal objects of ethnomethodological investigation, indexicality or deixis is the most familiar to students and teachers of language. The meaning of indexicality is summarised clearly by Leiter (1980:107).

*Indexicality* refers to the conceptual nature of objects and events. That is to say, without a supplied context, objects and events have equivocal or multiple meanings. The indexical property of talk is the fact that people routinely do not state the intended meaning of the expressions they use. The expressions are vague and equivocal, lending themselves to several meanings. The sense or meaning of these expressions cannot be decided unless a context is supplied. That context consists of such particulars as who the speaker is (his biography), his current purpose and intent, the setting in which the remarks are made, or the actual or potential relationship between speaker and hearer.

This is a substantial list of particulars, but it is, of course, an 'indefinitely extendible' one (Atkinson and Drew 1979:30), and Garfinkel (1967:25-28) demonstrated this point in a number of experiments. In one, he asked students to write down any mundane conversation they remembered on the left-hand side of a sheet of paper and then on the right-hand side to write what they understood that each person was really saying in that conversation. Whenever they completed the task, they were asked to elaborate, and then again to elaborate, until they were exhausted and frustrated. By that time, they had recognised that the task was impossible. Garfinkel's (1967) experiment demonstrated that 'for the purpose of *conducting their everyday affairs*' persons refuse



to permit each other to understand "what they are really talking about" ' (*Ibid.*:41), because it is simply too tiring, too time-consuming, and far too difficult to do so. Indexicality allows utterances to represent vastly more than they say and thereby makes mundane communication possible. This point will be illustrated repeatedly in Chapter 5, because the compliments collected for the purpose of this thesis will be discussed and explained in terms of indexical knowledge.

A more immediate illustration of the relevance of indexicality is provided by Thomas (1983:102), who reminds us of the textual pragmatic 'principle of economy' and of how a teacher's insistence on complete sentences not only violates the principle, but can also create an unfortunate impression.

To answer the question *Have you brought your coat?* with *Yes, I have brought my coat!* sounds petulant or positively testy! The same is true of inappropriate propositional explicitness. To say: *I was sorry to hear about your Grandma* sounds suitably sympathetic, whereas: *I was sorry to hear that your Grandma killed herself* is rather less tactful, and: *I was very sorry to hear that your Grandma tripped over the cat, cartwheeled down the stairs and brained herself on the electricity meter* seems downright unfeeling.

Indexicality is also a subject of considerable importance for those concerned with the language of the law, and Atkinson and Heritage (1979:6) note that

the fact that talk and other social actions are situated in particular contexts has been a perennial problem for all those who have ever tried to design some rule or definition for general application, and for those whose task it is to apply them to particular settings. Efforts to resolve such problems, furthermore, are not helped by the ease with which the notion of 'context', or features of specific ones, can be invoked in support of claims that there is something wrong with a rule, or that it does not apply in some particular case.

The concept of indexicality will be mentioned throughout this thesis, and, particularly in connection with the analysis of data, the thesis will argue that a greater understanding of indexicality could be of considerable benefit to teachers.

### 2.1.2 Reflexivity

Leiter (1980:138) claims that 'reflexivity is obliquely described in the literature' and that it is 'the second most misunderstood concept in ethnomethodology.' Holstein and Gubrium (1994:265) contribute both to the obliqueness of the concept, from the point of view of an EFL teacher, and to its misunderstanding, by suggesting, firstly, that it can be explained by saying that 'descriptive accounts of settings give shape to those settings while simultaneously being shaped by the settings they constitute,' and, secondly, by suggesting that reflexivity and indexicality are 'opposite sides of the same coin (*Ibid.*).'. Although the description of reflexivity in this section will show that this metaphor is somewhat misleading, Holstein and Gubrium (*Ibid.*) are, of course, correct in suggesting that interaction is the key to understanding reflexivity.

Garfinkel (1967) speaks both of indexical expressions and of indexical actions, and he makes it clear that the former become an object of interest primarily when they are used. The challenge for Garfinkel (1967) was to discover how members of society employ indexical expressions to constitute actions and to create a sense of a familiar and comprehensible social order. It is because the ethnomethodologist is examining both the social order and the methods that create it, that Holstein and Gubrium (*Ibid.*) can invoke their coin metaphor, but what the metaphor misses is the complex and



dynamic nature of the interaction between the indexical actions of one actor, the indexical actions of others, and the settings that their actions constitute. Reflexivity, therefore, is indexicality in action or the interactive effect of indexicality, and as reflexivity is a considerably lesser known concept than indexicality, it needs to be illustrated if it is to be understood.

Many writers illustrate the reflexive nature of indexical action with the example of the Azande and their infallible 'poison oracle,' the account of which is taken from the work of Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976). The example of the Azande is one that Sacks (1992a, 1992b) was fond of quoting and it is one that is also discussed by Heritage (1984a), Hilbert (1992), Mehan and Wood (1976), Mehan (1990), and Pollner (1974). Pollner's (1974) account will be drawn upon here, because it is by far the fullest.

In this familiar story, the Azande consult the oracle whenever they need help in making an important decision or in finding the answer to a serious problem. They pose their question to the oracle in a way that requires either a yes or a no answer and, for important matters, they repeat the ritual in a manner that appears to encourage contradictory responses. When observation reveals that the oracle does indeed contradict itself, and when it is seen that the advice given does not always have beneficial results, the Western observer wonders how the Azande can continue to believe in its existence. For the Azande, however, such a question does not arise, and Evans-Pritchard (Pollner 1974:42) explains why.

They are not surprised at contradictions; they expect them. Paradox though it may be, the errors as well as the valid judgments of the oracle prove to them



its infallibility. The fact that the oracle is wrong when it is interfered with by some mystical power shows how accurate are its judgements when these powers are excluded.

The Azande have ready made explanations for the oracle's self-contradictions and they choose the one that suits the situation best. Their explanations include the fact that the wrong type of poison was administered, or that the ceremony was not performed correctly, or that witchcraft was involved, and so on (*Ibid.*). Pollner (*Ibid.*:43-44) explains that the belief that the 'poison oracle does not err' has the status of an incorrigible proposition. This is a proposition that cannot be proved to be false, regardless of what happens, and therefore events, whether confirmatory or contradictory, are interpreted in the light of knowledge that is treated as axiomatic, as the examples below will illustrate.

The connection of this exotic and entertaining story to reflexivity and conversation analysis, and ultimately to language teaching, is that, as Schutz (1962a) and Garfinkel (1967) have proposed, we assume that we live in an intersubjective world which we jointly construct and we employ common-sense knowledge to create that sense of shared understanding. Pollner (1974:45) suggests that the employment of shared knowledge and understanding by such people as jurors is analogous to the Azande's 'doctrine of oracular infallibility,' and he shows how the incorrigible proposition of common-sense understanding is used in resolving seemingly incompatible accounts of traffic accidents. The incorrigible proposition adopted by judges, police officers and motorists is that there is but 'one single world' of intersubjective understanding, and that an interpretation acceptable to all the parties involved must therefore be available,

and that the problem is simply to find it (Pollner 1974:46-47). These individuals, like the Azande, have explanations for any seeming contradiction or any challenge to the incorrigible proposition that we live in a world of common-sense understandings:

Thus, 'hallucination', 'paranoia', 'bias', 'blindness', 'deafness', 'false consciousness', etc., in so far as they are understood as indicating a faulted or inadequate method of observing the world serve as candidate explanations of disjunctures (*ibid.*:48).

Before considering how reflexivity operates in talk, it might be of interest to mention briefly one chilling and one sombre account of reflexivity that are to be found in the literature. Mehan (1990) offers a disturbing description of oracular reasoning in a psychiatric examination in which powerful people constitute the situation in one way and a powerless patient constitutes it in a different way. A psychiatric patient is applying for release from a mental hospital, but he is frustrated in his efforts to persuade an examining panel that he is fit to be released. This frustration derives from the fact that the examiners define the patient as a mentally ill person and interpret everything that he says as reflexively reconstituting his situation as that of a man suffering from mental illness. All the evidence and the arguments that the patient puts forward founder on the incorrigible proposition that patients in mental hospitals are there because they are mentally ill, and not because of mistaken identity, an inaccurate diagnosis, malice, or some other reason.

In this connection, Garcia Marquez (1994) provides a very disquieting account of a woman who enters a psychiatric hospital unintentionally, but who is then unable to



leave because the incorrigible proposition does not allow for accidental incarceration. The subject of the story is a woman whose car breaks down one night during a storm. She hitches a lift on a passing truck and then falls asleep. The truck, however, is carrying patients to a mental asylum and the woman awakes when the vehicle has reached its destination and when the gates of the asylum have been closed behind it. She then encounters the horrifying consequences of the incorrigible proposition that people are in mental institutions because they are mentally ill.

The meeting between the psychiatric hospital's board of examiners and the patient was, as Mehan (1990:166) says, an example of the social construction of reality, but one that shows how reality is constructed among unequal parties. There is, of course, a parallel here with Thomas's (1984) work on unequal encounters, and it is interesting to note that she makes use of the ethnomethodological work of Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) on formulating context, although she relies on a secondary source in doing so (Heritage and Watson 1979). However, her claim that 'What Heritage and Watson are basically concerned with, however, is *linguistic* disambiguation, with getting straight to the facts of what was *said*, rather than what was *meant*' (Thomas 1983:230), suggests that she has merely skimmed the article and missed the ethnomethodological basis of the work. This is unfortunate, because there is a second and stronger connection between her work and Garfinkel's (1967), and one that deserves to be mentioned. In Thomas (1984), there is a striking example of a non-native speaker's metalinguistic comment being perceived as a metapragmatic one by a native speaker.



In the following [example], Speaker A is a British exchange teacher working in a Soviet university, B one of his first year students, temporarily acting as language laboratory technician.

#### Example 12

A: What the hell do they want this lot recorded for? What's the point?

B: What do you mean, what's the point.

A interpreted B's 'What do you mean, what's the point?' as a challenge to A's right to criticize the task he had been given, and an argument ensued. Some time later it emerged that the unfortunate B had simply been asking the meaning of the expression, 'what's the point?'.  
(Thomas 1984:232)

Compare that example with a remarkably similar example from Garfinkel (1967) and consider the conclusion he draws.

#### Case 1

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject's car pool, about having had a flat tire while going to work the previous day.

(S) I had a flat tire.

(E) What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way:

"What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question!"

(Garfinkel 1967:42)

Thomas (1984) describes the use of "What do you mean?" as a challenge to A's right to criticize the task he had been given. Garfinkel (1967), however, offers an additional explanation, because he designed experiments to elicit such a challenge. From Garfinkel's (1967) perspective, the challenge is not so much to status or to rights, but rather to intersubjective understanding, to our sense of a shared moral world in which indexical expressions can be used unthinkingly, in which actors are prepared to wait for actions to unfold and for familiar patterns to emerge, and in which we assume that

others are capable of seeing the world as we see it. Hence, he would add that the annoyance that Thomas's (1984) Englishman in Russia feels may be due not only to "How dare you ask me that?", but also to "Why on earth can't a fellow member of society understand a common-sense utterance?" The non-native speaker who is linguistically competent but not pragmatically competent is, to some extent, the natural 'cultural dope' (Garfinkel 1967:66-70) that Garfinkel (1967) obliged his student experimenters to become, and is capable of provoking the same anger. Garfinkel's (1967) insight is therefore not only additional, but perhaps more profound.

Given the importance of Thomas's (1983, 1984) work to cross-cultural communication, this lengthy excursus is perhaps justifiable and its conclusion brings us to the second, and poignant, account of the reflexive reconstitution of 'reality,' which is taken from Pollner and McDonald-Wikler (1985). It describes a family with a child who is severely retarded. The family denies this handicap and constructs an environment for the child which minimizes her handicap and which allows whatever she does to be interpreted as meaningful. The authors call one family practice "postscripting" or "commanding the already done." The family members observe the beginnings of possible actions and then instruct the child to complete them, e.g. "As Mary looked at her sister and climbed onto the chair, her sister said, "And you sit down." Mary sat down." (*Ibid.*:245-246). The paper, in fact, is called "The Social Construction of Unreality" and it demonstrates exactly that. The authors note that "all collectivities construct a meaningful order or *nomos*, and every *nomos* is erected in the face of chaos and 'irreality' " (*Ibid.*:253). Such a statement brings to mind the efforts of Bruno Bettelheim



(1992) and his fellow Jews to constitute a sense of normality in the most awful of 'extreme situations.'

To turn finally to the reflexive nature of talk, Heritage's (1984a:106-108) description of a greeting sequence is an excellent illustration of the reflexivity of language and indexical actions.

Consider, to begin with, a situation in which a social actor is walking down the corridor of an office building, interactively disengaged from any others on the scene. From the moment this actor is greeted by another, his or her circumstances are radically reconstituted from a situation of mutual disengagement between the parties to one in which some, at least minimal, engagement is proposed by the other. At this initial and elementary level, the first greeter's action has reflexively reconstituted the scene. Moreover, this first greeting transforms the scene for both parties - for the greeter (who moves from a circumstance of disengagement to one of engagement which he or she proposes, via the norm, will be reciprocated) and for the recipient of the greeting (who must now deal with this reconstituted circumstance).

In this context, and with the use of the norm for greetings, our recipient is now faced with a situation of 'choice'. If the recipient returns the greeting, he or she thereby reciprocates the proposal of interactional engagement made by the first greeter and, in so doing, ratifies it. In this case, the sense of the scene has undergone a further transformation from one in which interactional engagement was merely proposed unilaterally to one in which it is a bilaterally acknowledged fact. It is essential here to keep in mind that the scene does not remain unaltered by the second greeting. Rather it is developed and elaborated in a particular direction - the direction of mutual interactional engagement which was proposed by the first speaker.

From an ethnomethodological perspective, therefore, a greeting sequence is not seen as merely an exchange of actions and words, but as something more complex and more fragile. Although its performance is 'seen but unnoticed,' actors are acutely sensitive to its indexical and reflexive properties. No one greeting sequence can be exactly like any other greeting sequence, because, to paraphrase the philosopher



Heraclitus, we cannot step twice into the same rivers, for other waters are flowing on to us.

### 2.1.3 The documentary method of interpretation

Although the documentary method of interpretation has its roots in social theory and philosophy (Husserl 1965; Schutz 1962, 1964) rather than in psychology, it will nevertheless be readily understood by the language teacher because of its relation to the psychologically based schema theory (Carrell 1983, Carrell and Eisterhold 1983; Carrell *et al.* 1988; Rumelhart 1980). When Garfinkel (1967) is discussing the documentary method of interpretation, he does, in fact, use the term *schemata* (Garfinkel 1967:264), and it will become clear that he is using it in a manner that is recognisable to language teachers. The documentary method of interpretation is of particular importance to this thesis for three reasons. The first, and most important, reason is that the documentary method will be instrumental in clarifying the meaning of preference organization, which is of course the primary purpose of this thesis. The second, and most general, reason is that it is a method which involves the detection and creation of patterns of meaning. As such, it is of considerable relevance to conversation analysis, which studies sequences of utterances and the patterns they display. The third, and final, reason is that it will be used to explain the conversational analytic maxim that certain conversational mechanisms are both context free and context sensitive (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:699). This is a maxim which

the reader is asked to accept, but it is one for which a theoretical justification is rarely, if ever, offered.

Garfinkel (1967:76) begins his discussion of the documentary method by saying that members of a society can only act as they do and make the inferences they do because they believe that they share a common culture. This common culture includes knowledge of 'the conduct of family life, market organization, distributions of honor, competence, responsibility, goodwill, income, motives among members, frequency, causes of, and remedies for trouble, and the presence of good and evil purposes behind the apparent workings of things' (Garfinkel 1967:76). He adds that 'we shall call such knowledge of socially organized environments of concerted actions "common sense knowledge of social structures" ' (*Ibid.*).

Garfinkel (1967:77) observes that when a sociologist is engaged in an investigation, he can only make sense of what he sees and hears by drawing on his background knowledge and by attributing biographical information to the objects of his investigation. He embeds 'the appearances in his presupposed knowledge of social structures' (Garfinkel 1967:77). He attends to the sequential unfolding of a course of action and he waits for patterns to emerge and for things to become clear. What he sees reminds him of what has gone before, and the reflexive relationship between past and present helps him to predict the future development of a course of action. To explain how the connection between individual appearances and patterns of knowledge is possible, Garfinkel (1967:78) turns to the sociologist Karl Mannheim and his description of the documentary method of interpretation.



According to Mannheim, the documentary method involves the search for "... an identical homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning." The method consists of treating an actual appearance as "the document of," as "pointing to," as "standing on behalf of," a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of "what is known" about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other (Garfinkel 1967:78).

There is a clear connection between indexicality, reflexivity, and the documentary method of interpretation, because it is by means of the underlying homologous patterns that the indexical items have meaning and that reflexivity is possible. They, in turn, provide further evidence of the underlying pattern and reinforce its existence. As an illustration of the method in operation, we might consider the case of language teachers, who commonly use nationality to index various personality traits and work habits of their students (Leiter 1980:119-133), and who assume that the documentary method of interpretation will enable other language teachers to see what the actual appearance of the indexical item is "standing on behalf of." The process can be seen in the following data extract, in which three male teachers at a private language school in the United Kingdom are engaged in typical staff room talk. Ed enters the staff room and tells his colleagues about his students:

Ed: My: God it's quiet in there.  
Harry: Hhhh  
Ed: It's like working in a library in there.  
Harry: Anyway (0.5) you've ( ).  
Ed: I can't get anything out of them. (1.0) It's- there are three Japanese students and  
Keith: Oh right.  
Ed: ( ) also comes from (it's so quiet for example) it's a (.)  
Keith: .Yeah.

(Richards 1996)



Harry and Keith listen to Ed's complaints (quietness in an EFL classroom and the utterance 'My: God' indexing, for another EFL teacher, an undesirable state of affairs) about how quiet it is in his classroom until the mention of 'three Japanese students' causes Keith to interrupt with an "*Oh*-receipt" or a 'news receipt' (Heritage 1984b). Keith has waited for the underlying pattern to emerge, and it is the mention of 'three Japanese students' that allows him to assign greater meaning to the matter of the silence in the classroom. His sudden connection of the two elements causes him to interrupt and to signal that he has linked the documentary appearances with an appropriate underlying pattern.

A large number of documentary appearances are necessary before a member can respond as quickly as Keith did in the above example. Garfinkel (1967:186-207) studied the records kept by staff at the Out-patient Psychiatric Clinic at the U.C.L.A. Medical Center and discovered that staff did not have time to record all the data that the Clinic administration required. Consequently, records were kept in such a way that they were meaningful to colleagues, but not to outsiders. Garfinkel (1967) showed, as Hak (1992:142) says, that

sociologists cannot read folder contents correctly, because they do not have the necessary knowledge of the people to whom the records refer, the people who constructed the records in the first place, the principles that shape the clinic's organization and operation, and the actual procedures the staff follow in going about their day-to-day business, including reading a record.

Rather than describing what happened, the records "hint" at what might have happened (Hak 1992:141), and they can be read effectively only by those by those who are capable of finding 'the identical homologous pattern underlying [the] vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning' (Garfinkel 1967:78). The administrators of the clinic viewed the incomplete records as 'bad,' but Garfinkel's (1967) study demonstrated that there may be 'good' reasons for keeping 'bad' records, such as the principles of economy and efficiency (Mey 1993:274-277).

Garfinkel (1967) was concerned not merely to demonstrate the existence of underlying patterns, but also to show the lengths to which actors would go in order to assign utterances to patterns, to make sense of a sequence of talk, and to sustain the belief in an intersubjective world. He designed an experiment in which ten undergraduates were persuaded that a psychotherapist would do his best to offer them advice about personal problems. The students' questions could only be answered with a "yes" or a "no." These 'answers,' however, were determined in advance and, therefore, like the 'poison oracle' of the Azande, Garfinkel's sham oracle was easily capable of contradicting itself. Despite the random and predetermined nature of the answers, Garfinkel (1967:89-94) discovered that the students treated the answers as "answers-to-questions" and that they 'saw directly "what the adviser had in mind". ' When the answers were contradictory, the students were prepared to wait until some meaning could be assigned to them. Most of all, the students displayed an over-riding concern to search for and find a pattern to the interaction. Even when students suspected that they were being deceived, they did not abandon their search for a pattern. Instead, they saw the answers as documenting a pattern of deception rather than a pattern of



honest advice. They did not consider the possibility that the answers might be random, because to do so would be to challenge the incorrigible proposition of common sense-understanding and to invoke anomie, or, as Heritage (1987) puts it, to raise questions about the existence of the normative 'architecture of intersubjectivity.'

At the time of writing, the Star Satellite Television Broadcasting Network in South-east Asia is showing episodes of an Australian version of the "Candid Camera" programme, the premise of which is that ordinary members of society will seek to make sense of extraordinary actions by waiting for the pattern documented by the events to emerge. The programme succeeds because a pattern of joking or hoaxing is in due course either discerned or revealed. However, if the programme makers were to halt the interaction at a prearranged time, before the participants had been able to discern an underlying pattern, it is likely that the effect on some would be quite disturbing. The failure to detect a meaningful underlying pattern is what, according to Hoey (1983:82), gives Kafka's fiction the reputation for being so disquieting. Hoey (*Ibid.*) suggests that Kafka sabotages the reader's attempt to discover a familiar pattern in the indexical particulars of his stories, because they do not 'stand on behalf of' an underlying pattern that most readers can recognise.

During the course of this thesis, the relevance of the documentary method of interpretation to the meanings that are displayed in the sequential study of conversation and 'talk-in-interaction' (Schegloff 1987b) will become progressively clearer, and the connection of the documentary method to the concept of preference will be explained and illustrated in Chapter 4.



#### 2.1.4 The reciprocity of perspectives

Reciprocity is fundamental to human communication, and it is a subject that has attracted the attention of social anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, behavioural psychologists, developmental psychologists, linguists, and sociologists and social theorists, among others. For social anthropology, which is the 'study of society considered as a structure of person to person relationships' (Leach 1982:149), reciprocity is 'the simplest mode of exchange, and the earliest in human history' (Murphy 1986:130). The exchange that cements the interpersonal relationships is the exchange of gifts. Gifts are exchanged for the purpose of establishing and maintaining social bonds, and the most important gift that can be given, according to Levi-Strauss (1963), is that of a wife.

Evolutionary biologists have studied examples of reciprocal altruism in animals and have discussed its role in natural selection (Dawkins 1976; Hamilton 1963, 1972; Trivers 1971). Because mammals enjoy a long lifetime, have a low dispersal rate compared to other species, and display a high degree of mutual dependence, Trivers (1971:37-38) suggests that they are the ideal species in which to search for reciprocal altruism. However, he also suggests that the lack of reciprocity is a factor that motivates human aggression and indignation (Trivers 1971:49).

In the field of behavioural psychology, Krebs (1970:258) reviews the literature on altruism and reciprocity and concludes that although individuals do indeed act altruistically, that is not the same as saying that they are in fact altruistic.

Nevertheless, he notes both the powerful urge towards altruism and the fact that unselfishness is a basic tenet of the world's major religions. Other research in psychology has investigated the circumstances in which individuals actually display reciprocity. Altman (1973) was one of the first to look at the process by which people reciprocally reveal information and feelings to one another, and he established a model of the reciprocity of interpersonal exchange which predicts the reciprocity of disclosure as a function of topical intimacy and the stage of a social relationship. This model appears to have stood the test of time, because its predictions are confirmed by Won-Doornink's (1991) study of the reciprocated self-disclosures of eighty Korean male university students and eighty American male university students.

In developmental psychology and early language acquisition, there is a substantial literature on reciprocal interaction between infants and their mothers, and Bruner (1978) is a distinguished exemplar of this work. He argues that infants are equipped with the potential for pre-linguistic reciprocity and he quotes research which has found that children who are only a few weeks old appear to have a built-in mechanism for mimicking an adult's facial expression, and that quite young children are able to 'take another's position' when performing simple psychological experiments (Bruner 1978:215). He notes that the child's remarkable mastery of language by the time he is three 'depends in very major part on his grasp of reversible role relations, of deictic perspectives, and of turn-taking that is contingent on his acting out roles in a script (*Ibid.*).' Bruner (*Ibid.*:217) argues that the interaction between mother and infant is part of the initiation into adult dialogue, and that their rudimentary conversations follow the rules of turn-taking and adjacency pairing that are typical of the adult world. The



dialogues between mother and child are banal, and Bruner (1987:217) recommends that the field of language acquisition would benefit from a knowledge of the work of those experts in the field of the socially banal, namely the ethnomethodologists.

Social theory and sociology is the final field to be considered in this brief review and it draws upon a number of the fields mentioned above. Many social scientists who wish to debate mankind's moral sense turn to anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary biology for support (Gouldner 1960; Wilson 1993), and there is one notable example of a political scientist collaborating with an eminent evolutionary biologist on a study of the evolution of co-operation (Axelrod and Hamilton 1981). Reciprocal altruism is a controversial topic in biology, but Axelrod (1990) is nevertheless an enthralling study of co-operation, altruism and reciprocity in human beings.

More importantly, from the point of view of this thesis, there is the work of the social theorist, Alfred Schutz (1962, 1964), who has had a marked influence on the development of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984a). The literature of discourse analysis is full of studies of the failure of intersubjective understanding (Brenneis 1988; Grimshaw 1990), but Schutz (1962) considered the prior, and perhaps more difficult, question of how actors achieve intersubjective understanding. He asked how it was possible that social actors with quite different biographies and perspectives could nevertheless share common experiences of the world and how they could communicate about them. Schutz's (1962) answer was that although actors cannot possibly have identical experiences of the world or identical perspectives, they



nevertheless assume that their experiences of the world are similar and they act as though they are similar. They overcome their differences in perspectives and biographically determined situations and purposes by performing two basic idealizations:

- i) The idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints: I take it for granted - and assume my fellow-man does the same - that if I change places with him so that his "here" becomes mine, I shall be at the same distance from things and see them with the same typicality as he actually does; moreover, the same things would be in my reach which are actually in his. (The reverse is also true.)
- ii) The idealization of the congruency of the system of relevances: Until counterevidence I take it for granted - and assume my fellow-man does the same - that the differences in perspectives originating in our unique biographical situations are irrelevant for the purposes at hand of either of us and that he and I, that "We" assume that both of us have selected common objects and their features in an identical manner or at least an "empirically identical" manner, i.e. one sufficient for all practical purposes (Schutz 1962:11-12).

It is only by assuming that these two idealizations operate, and that a reciprocity of perspectives is achieved, that actors can overcome the limitations of their private experiential worlds and establish an intersubjectively shared stock of common knowledge and a common world (Heritage 1984a:55-56). When the two idealizations operate, it is possible, as Schutz (1962:316) says, that 'we both see the "same" flying bird in spite of the difference of our spatial position, sex, age, and the fact that you want to shoot it and I just want to enjoy it.'

This brief description of the 'ethno' methods of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation will conclude with three illustrations, the first of which is light-hearted and which is taken from a recording of a phone-in programme on a local radio

station in the United Kingdom. In the extract below, a female caller to the programme (B) is asking the male programme presenter (A) to play a record for her.

[CR:PI:97:56:1]

B: ... and could (.) any chance of a request my son gets married on Saturday=

A: =Which one?=  
B: =Peter (.) the eldest one=

A: =Yeh no no which record love?=  
B: =((laughs))=

A: =((laughs)) You wally=

B: =Look I'm nervous ((laughs)) this is is you know the the bridegroom's

mother here (.) u::m it's an old song J J Barry and it's called "My son"=  
A: =Great record=

B: =Absolutely=

A: =Great record=

B: =Just for him=

A: =Leave it to me=

B: =Thank you very much god bless ...

The example illustrates the way in which the mother's preoccupation and perspective do not match those of the programme presenter, who perhaps expects that callers, in so far as they are asking him for requests, will have made an effort to adopt his perspective in order to make the granting of their requests manageable. Despite the caller's current concerns and the way they shape her perspective, the brief misunderstanding might not have occurred had A not chosen the question, "Which one?", because it allows B to index the subject which appears to be uppermost in her mind.

In contrast to this example of a accidental and temporary failure to achieve a reciprocity of perspectives, Molotch and Boden's (1985) work provides a dramatic illustration of the refusal of actors to do so. Their work concerns the 1973



Congressional Watergate Hearings and, in particular, the 'pivotal' cross-examination of John W. Dean III by Senator Edward J. Gurney. Dean was a key witness in the hearings, while Gurney was "Nixon's man" on the Ervin Committee (*Ibid.*:275). Gurney's task was to defend the President against the charge that he knew about the Watergate burglary, and Molotch and Boden (1985) demonstrate that he did this in part by refusing to see anything from Dean's perspective or to share any of his understandings. As they say, Gurney's

strategy is to suppress the truth that, whenever people speak, their remarks are always the result of interpretive activities which are then expressed as "facts". Dean can describe the outcome of a complex array of social processes through a sentence which indicates that Nixon did, indeed, know about the cover-up on September 15, 1972, but there is no back-up set of utterances which can, literally, "prove" that such was the case. Nor could there be: that is not how humans make sense of the world either as they live it or as they recall it. Even if Dean could provide a verbatim and unambiguous quote from Nixon such as "Thanks for the cover-up John," there could still be a Gurney interpretation that such words "really" referred to keeping the lid on some unrelated and (legal) matter, or that Nixon still did not know what the cover-up actually involved, or even that he was thanking Dean for a blanket he lent Mrs Nixon on their last outing at Camp David (*Ibid.*:284).

While Gurney attempts to deny the significance that Dean attaches to context, Dean tries to show that he is employing interpretive procedures, such as indexicality, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives, that are known and used by all competent people.

When Dean says "you had to be there" or that his mind "is not a tape recorder", members of the audience have the option to feel the ring of everyday truth in such comments. They can fall back on their practical, tacit knowledge of the way the world is, on their ability, through the reciprocity of perspectives, to "see" the processes he is relying on. In short, they can empathize (*Ibid.*).



For students of applied linguistics and language teaching, indexicality, or deixis, may simply conjure up memories of worthy academic exercises, but the Gurney-Dean encounter is a reminder that people's reputations, careers, and even lives can depend on the willingness of others to interpret a phrase such as "Thanks for the cover-up John" from a point of view other than their own. An even more momentous example comes from accounts of the trial of Christopher Craig and Derek Bentley for the murder of a police officer in London in 1952. The prosecution alleged that when Bentley shouted to Craig, "Let him have it, Chris," he was urging his companion to shoot the police officer rather than surrender his weapon, and it persuaded the jury to understand the utterance from the prosecution's point of view and to condemn Bentley to death (Coulthard 1992:245).

The reciprocity of perspectives and indexicality, reflexivity, and the documentary method of interpretation are therefore four of the methods that social actors employ in creating a sense of a world held in common. A knowledge of these methods is invaluable in analysing conversational data and in evaluating other forms of analysis. Having briefly described and discussed the four methods, this Chapter will now turn to the subject of conversation analysis. It will outline the major developments in the field over the past twenty-five years and it will describe the impact that related fields, such as symbolic interactionism and the ethnography of communication, have had on conversation analysis.

## ***2.2 Conversation Analysis***

As the most significant discoveries of conversation analysis, such as the organization of turn-taking and the nature of adjacency pairs, are now part of established knowledge in applied linguistics, this section will focus on the origins of conversation analysis and its evolution over the past twenty years, and it will argue that both have important implications for language teachers. It will propose, as the whole thesis does, that because the ethnomethodological roots of the subject have been neglected, readers new to the field receive a partial and truncated interpretation of conversation analysis. Such an interpretation hinders their efforts to understand the subject, because it offers them practical analysis without theoretical justification; and it restricts their ability to undertake research, because it denies them the theoretical knowledge that was possessed by an earlier generation of researchers in conversation analysis. They are asked, in effect, to approach the subject inductively, but without the training that such an approach requires.

Conversation analysis is 'an extension of Garfinkel's investigation of members' methods into the domain of empirical talk' (Hilbert 1992:203), and it was the 'invention' of Garfinkel's student, friend, and collaborator, Harvey Sacks (1992b:549). Conversation analysis seeks to reveal the mechanisms that members employ in creating a sense of order and of mutual understanding, because ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts believe that there is order 'at all points' (Sacks 1984:22). Sacks (1984:22) says that the existence of order at all points



could be used to explain what are otherwise strange facts - for example, that conventional sociological survey research, though it recurrently fails to satisfy constraints on proper statistical procedures, nevertheless gets orderly results; or, for example, that the anthropologist's procedures, which tend to involve an occasional tapping into a society, asking one or two people more or less extended questions, turn out to be often extremely generalizable. Now the orderly results and the generalizability could be treated as a warrant for such procedures, or as a tremendous puzzle. Or they could be seen as a consequence of the fact that, given the possibility that there is overwhelming order, it would be extremely hard *not* to find it, no matter how or where we looked.

With his training in sociology and ethnomethodology, Sacks (1992a, 1992b) saw conversation more as a manifestation of social action than a linguistic object, though his lectures do show a strong interest in linguistics (Sacks 1992a:342-353, 370-388, 716-747). Hence, when he listened to conversational data or studied transcripts of talk, he was searching for the recurrent mechanisms that actors employ in constituting mundane activities. Given that rational actors do not generally engage in meaningless talk, Sacks (1992a, 1992b) was convinced that an examination of any stretch of talk would reveal certain mechanisms at work. Hence, he confidently recommended the unmotivated examination of data, because he believed that 'if we pick up any data, without bringing any problems to it, we will find something' (Sacks 1984:27).

Sacks (1984:25) believed in 'using observation as a basis for theorizing' and therefore he

started to work with tape-recorded conversations. Such materials had a single virtue, that I could replay them. I could transcribe them somewhat and study them extendedly - however long it might take. The tape-recorded materials constituted a "good enough" record of what happened. It was not from any large interest in language or from some theoretical formulation of what should be



studied that I started with tape-recorded conversations, but simply because I could get my hands on it and I could study it again and again, and also, consequentially, because others could look at what I had studied and make of it what they could, if, for example, they wanted to be able to disagree with me (*ibid.*:26).

The remarkable results of this fortuitous decision are well known, and Sacks and his colleagues Schegloff, Jefferson, and Pomerantz are responsible for many of them. This approach to the study of data revealed the organization of turn-taking in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), the nature of adjacency pairs (Sacks 1992a), the mechanisms of topic transition (Sacks 1992a), the existence of preference (Pomerantz 1978, 1984; Sacks 1975, 1987; Sacks and Schegloff 1979), sequencing in conversational openings (Schegloff 1972a, 1986), the recycling of turn beginnings (Schegloff 1987c), the use of preliminaries to questions (Schegloff 1980), and the sequential organization of laughter (Jefferson 1979; Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff 1987).

Although Sacks (1992a, 1992b) started lecturing on the analysis of conversation at the University of California in 1964, Moerman (1988:180) says that conversation analysis was still little known in the United States in 1971, when he and Sacks presented a paper at the 70th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, however, gained an early foothold in the United Kingdom, particularly when compared to other European countries (Coulon 1995). This was partly the result of a growing familiarity with Garfinkel's major publication (Garfinkel 1967), which led to an invitation to Garfinkel to lecture at Manchester University in 1973 (Flynn 1991:150). The circulation of transcripts of that

lecture, as well as transcripts of Sacks' lectures at the University of California, provided a stimulus for research in the United Kingdom (Flynn 1991:149-150). The move of Sacks' associate and "data recovery technician," Gail Jefferson, to Manchester University and later to the University of York, and Anita Pomerantz's stay at Oxford and York Universities further contributed to the growth of conversation analytic studies in Britain.

The most notable British achievements in the study of mundane conversation include the description of *Oh*-receipts or change-of-state tokens (Heritage 1984b), *And*-prefacing (Heritage and Sorjonen 1994), the closing of conversations (Button 1987, 1990), topic nomination and generation (Button and Casey 1984, 1985, 1988/89), invitation, offer, and request sequences (Davidson 1984, 1990), displays of reciprocity (Heath 1982), account sequences (Heritage 1988; Firth 1995), the management of grantings and rejections (Wootton 1981), and speakers' 'reportings' in invitation sequences (Drew 1984).

Mundane conversation, however, has not been the sole research interest of British conversation analysts, or of their American and European counterparts (Heritage 1997). Instead, many have responded to the observation of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974:729) that turn-taking in other speech-exchange systems, such as press conferences, seminars, therapy sessions, interviews, trials, etc., 'has barely been looked into.' This suggestion has led to a more diverse programme of studies, though its outcome has been questioned by Drew (1990:31), who observes that



Until recently, most of the work on institutional discourse from a CA [Conversation Analysis] perspective focused on interactions characterized by specialized turn-taking systems in which speaker turns are pre-allocated, for instance, ones in which the professional asks questions, and the other 'lay' participant answers (as in courts: Atkinson and Drew 1979; Maynard 1984; news interviews: Greatbatch 1988; Clayman 1988; classroom: Mehan 1979). While the contribution of this work is considerable ... and perhaps not yet spent, exclusive focus on such highly formalized talk takes an over-restricted view of institutional or work-related discourse. It is now time that CA's perspective was brought to bear on the very much wider range of settings in which there is no such formal constraint on turn-taking, and therefore in which the distinctiveness of the discourse, as compared with conversation, is not to be found in stylized sequential patterns.

The results of such a recommendation can be seen, predictably enough, in an important recent collection edited by Drew and Heritage (1992). The collection includes studies of psychiatric intake interviews, job interviews, proceedings in small claims courts, doctor-patient interaction, talk between Health visitors and first-time mothers, and calls to emergency services. A wider range of settings is also evident in the collections edited by ten Have and Psathas (1995), and by Firth (1995), and in a survey by Drew and Sorjonen (1997).

Schegloff (1991:52-53), however, suggests that rather than searching for more exotic settings, researchers might instead look more carefully at some of the settings that have already been examined, because

Even if we can show by analysis of the details of the interaction that some characterization of the context or the setting in which the talk is going on (such as "in the hospital") is relevant for the parties, that they are oriented to the setting so characterized, there remains another problem, and that is to show how the context or the setting (the local social structure), *in that aspect*, is procedurally consequential to the talk. How does the fact that the talk is being conducted in some setting (say "the hospital") issue in any consequences for



the shape, form, trajectory, content, or character of the interaction that the parties conduct? And *what is the mechanism by which the context-so-understood has determinate consequences for the talk?*

Schegloff (1991) here is proposing a re-appraisal of the research into talk in work-related settings in the light of 'the enduring ethnomethodological emphasis on the local, moment-by-moment determination of meaning in social contexts' (Heritage 1984a:2). In his own research, Schegloff (1988/89) provides a demonstration not so much of how the context-so-understood has determinate consequences for the talk, but rather of how it can be rendered procedurally *inconsequential* by the participants. The study analyses the January 25th, 1988, interview of George Bush, who was then running for the Republican presidential nomination, by Dan Rather, who was the Chief Anchor of the CBS Evening News (*ibid.*:238). It shows that the talk begins as an interview but ends as a confrontation, and that "labelling and announcing an occasion of talk-in-interaction does not *ipso facto* make it one, nor does it guarantee that what began as one will remain one" (*ibid.*:215).

Hence, although conversation analysts in the United States, Britain, and other parts of the world continue to study mundane conversation, there has been 'a recent and sustained trend' (Firth 1995:25) towards focusing more generally on talk-in-interaction, wherever and however it occurs. One might suggest that such a progression is inevitable, because the major discoveries concerning the structure of mundane conversation were made by Sacks and Schegloff and their colleagues in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies. If mundane conversation alone were to remain the focus of the analyst, then it might be imagined that the mechanisms revealed by research would

be destined to be ever smaller, more specialized, and less appealing, particularly to an audience of applied linguists and language teachers. It might be argued that we would eventually reach the conversation analytical equivalent of the type of 'constricted' and 'pedestrian' scientific research findings that so amuse Thomas (1995:28).

My favourite such paper, presented in 1994 by no fewer than six authors at a wolf conference in Bieszczady, Poland, discusses the micturition habits in the snow of high-ranking wolves, as distinguished from low-ranking wolves; it shows how urine produced from the modest crouch of a low-ranking wolf drills a narrow, inconspicuous hole deep in the snow, a tight little chimney from which odor can scarcely emerge. In contrast the raised-leg squirting of a high-ranking wolf sprinkles the droplets far and wide, creating a highly visible signal and clouds of odor, asserting its creator's enviable status.

Conversation analysts, it seems, are avoiding this journey into ever-more esoteric and risible areas of research by looking beyond the study of mundane conversation into the ways in which talk-in-interaction is constituted in diverse settings. These, however, are not the only choices available to conversation analysts and the final part of this review of conversation analysis will describe a third possibility and suggest why it is so rarely considered. It will also address the problems which the language teacher encounters when attempting to analyze data in a conversation analytic fashion.

The alternative to an increasingly constricted study of mundane conversation or to a search for as yet unexamined genres of talk is to reinvigorate conversation analysis by connecting it firmly to its ethnomethodological roots. The clarification of this connection would enable the language teacher to understand the ideas that inform the



study of conversational data. This is particularly necessary, because important works, such as Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Button and Lee (1987), Levinson (1983), Roger and Bull (1989), and Taylor and Cameron (1987), have resulted in conversation analysis moving out from the *field of sociology* into the *fields of applied linguistics, communication studies, and intercultural studies* (Firth 1995). However, it is an often overlooked fact that, until quite recently, almost every major work in conversation analysis was written by a sociologist or an anthropologist and was, in most cases, published in journals read by social scientists, rather than by applied linguists or language teachers. Sociologists were writing for an audience of social scientists, not for language teachers.

Consequently, just as Garfinkel (1967) pointed out that sociologists cannot read the files of a psychiatric clinic in the way that members of the staff of the clinic can read them, because they lack the documentary schemata possessed by the latter, so applied linguists and language teachers cannot read studies in conversation analysis in the same way as the social scientists for whom the studies were originally written. Because such studies are prepared primarily for sociologists and other social scientists, references to ethnomethodology and to Garfinkel and Sacks are often sufficient to inform the reader of the underlying assumptions of the work and of the methods that inform the analysis. However, the significance of such references is not only likely to be missed by the interested language teacher or by the student of applied linguistics, but the sociologists who write about conversation analysis for language teachers and applied linguists may recognise the limitations of their audience and may provide them with a simplified version of the subject. As a result,



conversation analysis can appear, from the point of view of the language teacher, to be 'a method without a substance,' as the eminent American sociologist Lewis Coser said of ethnomethodology (Heritage 1988:225; Coulon 1995:64-70).

The simplification of texts for readers with little or no sociological background can be seen by comparing three reviews of recent developments in conversation analysis. The reviews are Heritage (1985b), Heritage (1989), and Goodwin and Heritage (1990). Heritage (1985b) appeared in *Sociolinguistics*, the Newsletter of the Research Committee on Sociolinguistics of the International Sociological Association. Heritage (1989) is a 'revised, shortened and thoroughly updated version of Heritage (1985b)' and it was published in a collection of interdisciplinary approaches to interpersonal communication. Goodwin and Heritage (1990) was published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. By looking at the publishers and the authors' own words, one might suggest that anthropologists and other social scientists were the primary audience for Goodwin and Heritage (1990), sociologists and sociolinguists for Heritage (1985b), and social scientists, applied linguists, and language teachers for Heritage (1989).

If conversation analysts do simplify texts for readers without a background in social science, the expectation, therefore, would be that Goodwin and Heritage (1990) and Heritage (1985b) would provide the fullest theoretical background and that Heritage (1989) would provide the slightest background of the three. This, in fact, is the case. Goodwin and Heritage (1990) has a two and a half page section entitled "Background," and this discusses the ideas of Husserl, Schutz, Garfinkel, and Sacks, and also refers to the work of Pollner and Evans-Pritchard, among others. It mentions

the role of indexicality, reflexivity, and the reciprocity of perspectives in creating and sustaining a sense of an intersubjective world. The anthropologist who wishes to know more about the theoretical foundations of conversation analysis therefore has the necessary references to pursue that interest.

In Heritage (1985b), there is also a "Background" section, but it contains no mention of the work of Husserl or Schutz, and very little space is devoted to the work of Garfinkel. In fact, the article describes two fundamental assumptions of conversation analysis and states that 'these assumptions can be traced to Garfinkel's (1967) pioneering remarks on the indexical character of talk and action' (Heritage 1985b:1). That is almost all that is said about Garfinkel, other than a closing comment which says that 'conversation analytic writings have, from the outset, incorporated a variety of theoretical insights (for example, those severally attributable to Garfinkel, Goffman and Grice) within the framework of a coherent, working empirical research programme' (Heritage 1985b:9). However, for an audience of sociologists and sociolinguists, such references may represent adequate information. It is also worth noting that Heritage (1985b) is only eighteen pages long, whereas Goodwin and Heritage (1990) is twenty-five pages long.

The third article, Heritage (1989), is the longest, at twenty-seven pages. It contains no references to Husserl, Schutz, or Pollner, and there is even less mention of Garfinkel than there was in Heritage (1985b). The underlying assumptions referred to in the previous paragraph are repeated, but they are no longer attributed to Garfinkel, and the two brief references to Garfinkel (Heritage 1989:25, 37) would have little or no



meaning for the general reader. One of the two references is the closing comment referred to above.

Conversation-analytic writings have, from the outset, plainly incorporated a variety of insights (for example, those severally attributable to Garfinkel, Goffman and Grice) within the framework of a coherent, working empirical programme (Heritage 1989:37).

The other reference to Garfinkel (1967) is likely to be even less meaningful to a reader whose background is in applied linguistics.

In relation to the maintenance of intersubjectivity, the concept suggested in which speakers would, through the production of next actions, unavoidably display a particular public understanding of the prior talk. Thus in so far as a second speaker's utterance performed an action which could be found, with whatever degree of interpretative latitude (Garfinkel 1963, 1967; Grice, 1975), to be fitted to its prior, it would be treated as displaying an understanding of its prior which was appropriate to that fit (Heritage 1989:25).

Heritage (1989:21) justifies deleting the references that appeared in Heritage (1985b) by saying that 'for space reasons, the present discussion will largely concentrate on 'structural' aspects of conversation-analytic research,' but no such decision was made for Goodwin and Heritage (1990), which is a slightly shorter text.

This specific example confirms what even a casual reading of work in conversation analysis shows, and that is that while the reader is presented with structural descriptions of conversational practices, he or she is offered little or no theoretical background. As a result, the reader can only gaze in awe at the revelations of a Sacks



or a Schegloff and wonder how on earth it is all done. Sacks' (1984:27) claim that 'if we pick up any data ... we will find something' is improbable unless one possesses a little of the knowledge and training that Sacks was able to employ, and that is not being passed on from the generation of conversation analysts who were also sociologists to the generation of conversation analysts who are also applied linguists or language teachers. The result is that the latter are producing some unsound work, and examples of this work will be examined at the end of Chapter 3.

The opening paragraph of this review of Conversation Analysis claimed that the origins of the subject have implications for language teachers who wish to analyze conversational data. It has been argued that those origins were in sociology and that success in understanding and doing conversation analysis will be elusive unless language teachers can bring adequate background knowledge to bear on the data. That first paragraph also claimed that the way in which conversation analysis has evolved has consequences for the language teacher, and these consequences are to do with Schegloff's (1991) recommendation that the researcher must demonstrate the procedural consequentiality of invoking a particular setting. There is now a 'sustained trend' towards the study of talk in diverse settings (Firth 1995:25), but one can only wonder how the language teacher is to recognize the ways in which context is constituted and made procedurally consequential unless she is familiar with the ethnomethodological notions of indexicality, reflexivity, the reciprocity of perspectives, and the documentary method of interpretation. Without this understanding, conversation analysis is likely to remain a structural 'method without a substance.' This thesis will use the case of preference organization to illustrate the difference that a

knowledge of underlying assumptions can make to a 'difficult' concept (Mazeland et al 1995:292); it will do so by adding substance to method.

## ***2.3 Other influences on conversation analysis***

The history of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis has been influenced both by Harvey Sacks' teacher, Erving Goffman, whose work defies precise categorization (Collins 1988), and by the broad field of ethnography (Erickson 1996; Moerman 1988, 1992; Saville-Troike 1982, 1996). Both continue to be beneficial for the teacher of conversation analysis; Goffman in a perhaps unexpected way, and ethnography as a means of enriching the analysis of data. The influence of each will be discussed in turn.

### **2.3.1 The work of Erving Goffman**

Erving Goffman made a significant contribution to the literature on face-to-face interaction (Drew and Wootton 1988a:1-13), and his work is relevant to this thesis for two reasons. The first is that there is a pedagogical benefit in using Goffman (1963, 1969, 1971) as an introduction to the study of conversation analysis, as Sacks (1992a:619) suggests; and the second is that Goffman's work on 'face' and politeness has been drawn into the discussion of the meaning of preference organization, with unhelpful results. Levinson's (1983) introduction of 'face' into the discussion of the

meaning of preference has already been referred to, and it will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

As no standard text in applied linguistics or language teaching appears to recommend Goffman (1963, 1969, 1971) as preliminary reading for a study of conversation analysis, the reader might well wonder why Sacks (1992a:619) believes that students would benefit by beginning in this way. This divergence of approach, however, stems from the difference in the way Sacks presented conversation analysis to his audience of students of sociology, and the way the subject is presented to a contemporary audience of students of applied linguistics and language teaching. As a sociologist and an ethnomethodologist, Sacks was interested in the difficult task of revealing 'the invisibility of common sense' (ten Have 1990:29), and in demonstrating the importance of talk in creating a sense of order and intersubjectivity. For the contemporary audience, however, there is no such obvious ethnomethodological objective, and the student of conversation analysis studies the structural mechanisms of talk in a relatively untroubled fashion.

For Sacks' students, on the other hand, the study of mundane conversation was far from untroubled, as we shall see below. Sacks' objective was to get the members of his audience to see that ordinary events, such as greeting someone or having a pleasant lunch with others, do not just happen, but that they are achievements and that they are jointly constituted by the parties to the interaction. When you think of an ordinary person, Sacks (1992b:216) says, you should think of somebody who has



as their job, as their constant preoccupation, doing 'being ordinary.' It's not that somebody *is* ordinary, it's perhaps that that's what their business is. And it takes work, as any other business does.

Sacks was not only asking his students to accept that doing 'being ordinary' was a worthwhile object of study, but he was doing so at a time when even his fellow sociologists were having difficulty in understanding the nature of the ethnomethodological work that he and Garfinkel were engaged in (Coulon 1995; Pollner 1991:370). Just how great a demand Sacks was making of his students can be seen in the following extract, in which he presents them with a brief exchange of talk and then comments on it:

Q: When did you have the cast taken off?

A: Tuesday.

It's easy enough in the first instance to pose social control problems by reference to such things as 'Why do people stop at street lights?' 'why don't people rape their neighbours?' You are only at the point where sociology is interesting when you can see that 'Tuesday' is the right sort of answer to the question "When did you have the cast taken off?" under certain circumstances, and 'November eleventh' is an answer that would get you committed. And you don't produce the appropriate one by reference to an avoidance of somebody thinking you're crazy, and nobody notices that you have done 'something which a normal person does' (Sacks 1992a:740-741).

It is not surprising, therefore, that students found Sacks' ethnomethodological programme hard to understand, or that his lectures gave rise to comments of the following sort:

*[A woman in the class has been raising her hand for a while]*

HS: Are you asking a question, or are you bidding, or what?

Q: Well, I was just wondering if we're ever going to get round to topics of conversation.

HS: That's an amazing question. I wouldn't know what you're - What do you have in mind?

Q: I just think we should get some content. I feel very frustrated about it.

HS: Oh. What do you mean by some content?

Q: Pardon me?

HS: What would be some content?

Q: I don't know. I expected at least that you're going to analyze conversations, or have something a little more interesting.

HS: I guess I figure I've been analyzing conversations.

Q: Well we haven't got past that adjacency pair parts yet.

HS: Oh yeah. We're not going to get past it.

Q: Ever?

HS: Not in this course, no. It's a rather fundamental part of conversation. (Sacks 1992b:549)

Ethnomethodology is not an easy subject to get into, and Heritage (1984a:vii) has briefly described his own difficult initiation. It is, however, a major part of the foundation of conversation analysis, but most writers on conversation analysis do not discuss ethnomethodology and they allow their readers to gain the impression that conversation analysis is an essentially rootless, empirical enterprise. The lecturer who is introducing students to conversation analysis therefore faces the dilemma of presenting them with the sometimes 'formidably abstract' concepts of ethnomethodology (Heritage 1984a:1) and possibly alienating them, or of concentrating on the structural mechanisms of talk and possibly trivialising the subject. It was in response to this dilemma that Sacks advised his students to begin by reading the work of Erving Goffman.

I have one suggestion as to what would constitute a helpful background (as compared to no background, which is quite alright), and that is, some book of Goffman's like *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. What I do has only the following relation to Goffman's work: He tries to - and with some great success - make sociological points turning on the details of everyday life, such that when



you read a book like *The Presentation of Self*, on pretty much any page you come across something that's news to you, which you hadn't noticed, which you could notice, which you can thereafter more or less see going on. (He tries more than that, he tries to put it all together in some sort of package).

The sorts of things he's attending and the kinds of points he's making in no way stand in a one-to-one relationship with the sorts of things that I do. But nonetheless, as compared to what it is that's available in sociology, that would be the best thing to have, if one wanted some background. If what I'm doing seems strange, then after a couple of days of reading in *Presentation of Self*, you might be in a position to feel at home with some of the things I'll try to do (Sacks 1992a:619).

The use of selected excerpts from the work of Goffman (1963, 1969), with appropriate provisos (R. Watson 1992), is an approach I have adopted for introducing students at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam to the conversation analysis component of the third-year course on Discourse Analysis. The excerpts are a valuable means of raising the student's awareness of the 'seen but unnoticed' constitution of routine events and they have two particular advantages. One is that Goffman's work is very readable, and it has long been popular with academic and non-academic audiences alike, as Deborah Tannen and her Thanksgiving dinner guests demonstrate (Tannen 1984:58-64). The other is that there are certain similarities between Goffman's work and that of Garfinkel (Drew and Wootton 1988a:8). For example, Goffman (1963) describes individuals as employing methods that seem very close to the ethnomethodological notions of the reciprocity of perspectives (*ibid.*:15-16), reflexivity (*ibid.*:21-33), and indexicality (*ibid.*:13-30), and to the concept of preference in conversation analysis (*ibid.*:35, 60-61, 79).



In his recommendation of Goffman, Sacks (1992a:619) notes that 'on pretty much any page you come across something that's news to you,' and Schegloff (1988:91) wonders, 'How many readers, and hearers, felt revealed and exposed, gave out embarrassed giggles at the sense of being found out by his accounts.' As an illustration of the exposure that we all feel on reading his work, we can consider what Goffman (1963:60) has to say about how involved an individual is allowed to be in any activity. He observes that in American middle-class society 'the individual is required to give visible evidence that he has not wholly given himself up to [the] main focus of attention. Some slight margin of self-command and self-possession will typically be required and exhibited.' Of the many examples that Goffman offers, there is one that is familiar to all teachers and students.

The sharing of an office with another often means a limit on work, because extreme concentration and immersion in a task will become an improper handling of oneself in the situation. Some co-workers apparently resolve the issue by gradually according each other the status of nonperson, thus allowing a relaxation of situational proprieties and an increase in situated concentration. This may even be carried to the point where one individual allows himself half-audible "progress grunts" such as, "What do you know!" "Hm hm," "let's see," without excusing himself to his co-worker. Other dissociated side involvements such as hair twisting may also be indulged in and tolerated in such circumstances (Goffman 1963:62-63).

In this connection, it is interesting to note that a majority of lecturers at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam cover the inside of the glass panels of their office doors, so that they cannot be seen, and perhaps cannot be seen when in a state of over-involvement.

The fact that Goffman's work is of value in raising awareness of the highly complex nature of face-to-face interaction in mundane situations is the first reason why it is relevant to this thesis; the second reason concerns the use that conversation analysts have made of Goffman's work on 'face' and politeness. The importance of 'face' and politeness in interaction has been brought to the attention of a wide audience by Brown and Levinson (1987), and the term 'face threatening act' has become part of the vocabulary of applied linguistics. 'Face' and politeness have also been used by leading writers on conversation analysis and discourse analysis to explain the workings of preference organization (Atkinson and Heritage 1979; Heritage 1984a; Levinson 1983; Mey 1993; Taylor and Cameron 1987; and Yule 1996), and this use will be discussed fully in the next section. However, it is important to note that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are interested in discovering *how* members of society create a sense of an intersubjective world, and not *why* they do so. That is not to suggest that motivation is of no interest to ethnomethodologists, but rather that they regard proper description as explanatory (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Goffman, on the other hand, was deeply interested in the causes of behaviour and 'from his earliest writing on interaction, [his] focus on patterns of talk and action was tied to ritual and face' (Schegloff 1988b:94). It was because Goffman was interested in *why* actors do what they do, and Sacks was interested in understanding *how* actors constitute a sense of a shared reality, that Sacks' (1992a:691) recommendation of Goffman's work to his students is a qualified one.



The ethnomethodologist and the conversation analyst are not therefore concerned about individual psychological motivation, and Schegloff (1988a:98) provides a clear and powerful account of why this is so.

There is a notion that turn-taking - the provision of a single speaker at a time, with minimization of gap and overlap, has to do with politeness, etiquette or civility. In part this view is related to our treatment in western culture, and in particular in Anglo-Saxon culture, of violations of ordinary turn-taking practices as impoliteness or lack of civility.

But there are serious difficulties in proceeding in this way. Such notions as impoliteness or rudeness need to be recognized as parts of the *vernacular culture* which is the mark of competent membership in the society. They are parts of the apparatus of social control, used for the treatment of occasional violations, lapses, violators, the prospects of which are used to socialize new members to avoid the behaviour which will earn them, and their families or social groups, such epithets.

But the vernacular culture's proper business concerns the *running* of the society, not the building of a discipline for its rigorous description. 'Impoliteness' and 'incivility' may work as vernacular accounts of *occasional lapses* in the turn-taking order (and other orders), but do not serve as an account for the existence and character of *the orders themselves*. The fact that violations of some normative structure may be labelled in some fashion does not account for why there was a normative structure there in the first place, or why *that* normative structure.

If, in a *gedankenexperiment*, one imagines a society with *no* turn-taking system, it would not be one that was especially impolite or uncivil. It would be one in which *the very possibility - the assured possibility - of co-ordinated action through talk had been lost*, for example, the sense of one action as *responsive* to another.

What Schegloff (*ibid.*) helps us to see is that although, from a pedagogical point of view, an awareness of the vernacular culture is exactly what is needed because of its value to EFL learners, from the point of view of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, a deeper level of understanding is required if we are to recognize what the



notion of preference involves. However, the two levels are frequently confused in the literature, and they need to be separated and the notion of preference needs to be clarified if it is to be of any value in applied linguistics and EFL.

### 2.3.2 Ethnography

This thesis argues that conversation analysis has become divorced from its ethnomethodological roots and risks becoming 'barren' as a result (G. Watson 1992:xix). Ethnomethodology also has roots in ethnography and many of its most striking early studies were ethnographic (Bittner 1967; Erickson 1975; Wieder 1974). This section, and subsequent sections, will argue that ethnomethodology, and particularly conversation analysis, can become a more fruitful discipline by attending to the practices of ethnographers. It will also argue that until that happens, students of conversation analysis need to beware of the consequences of the separation of conversation analysis from ethnography.

There are important similarities and differences between the two fields. Saville-Troike (1996:351) says that 'a primary aim of the ethnographic approach to the study of communicative activity is to provide a framework for the collection and analysis of descriptive data about the way in which social meaning is conveyed, constructed, and negotiated.' Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are also interested in the social construction of meaning, and this point has been stated a number of times in this thesis. Saville-Troike (*Ibid.*:352-353) also explains that ethnography is interested

in the way interaction generates patterns of behaviour, and it has been shown that ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts regard the documentary method of interpretation as central to an understanding of how patterns are constituted and reconstituted.

However, Saville-Troike (*Ibid.*:354) depicts ethnomethodology as having 'generally focused on relatively small units of communication,' and contrasts that approach with the approach of the ethnography of communication, which typically 'looks for strategies and conventions governing larger units of communication' (*Ibid.*). Section 5 of Chapter 5 will argue that conversation analysis has indeed focused on small units of communication and has done so, to a large extent, for reasons of history and expediency, but that some ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts are now beginning to look at larger units of communication (Psathas 1992).

There is also an important distinction between the two fields in terms of methodology, because 'doing ethnography' in another culture involves first and foremost field work, including observing, asking questions, participating in group activities, and testing the validity of one's perceptions against the intuition of the natives' (Saville-Troike 1982:4). Conversation analysis, however, insists on the use of naturally-occurring talk which has been recorded on audio- or video-tape, not only because such data is much richer than that available to memory or intuition (Moerman 1988:13), but also because it can be analyzed repeatedly and made available to others for the purpose of verification or reinterpretation (Heritage and Atkinson 1984:2-5). Ethnomethodology, on the other hand, has a long history of ethnographic research in the process of discovering how

actors constitute a sense of reality, and one scholar whose interests encompass ethnography, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis has proposed that all three fields will be enriched if researchers attempt to learn from the ideas and methods of each other (Moerman 1988).

Moerman (1988) argues in favour of a culturally contexted conversation analysis and against the 'aridity of adjacency pair analysis' (G. Watson 1992:xx). It is possible to describe *adjacency pair analysis* as *arid*, because conversation analysts have long been preoccupied with identifying the context free mechanisms that actors employ in interaction, while largely ignoring their context sensitive applications. Moerman (1988:9), however, believes that

unless we know how occasions of speech are socially organized, we can neither fully understand nor properly evaluate our data. We collect cultural artifacts that come mounted in a context that gives them their momentarily enlivened meaning. We must preserve their interactional matrix, not pretend to scoop nuggets from a swamp.

He illustrates this point by asking

how could the conversation analyst recognize an utterance as a pre-invitation, for example, without trading on covert native knowledge of dating practices and the special significance for them of Saturday night? It is with a native's recognition of an exaggeratedly Yiddish accent, and of what that means for participants of this kind, that the analyst locates an attempted, and possibly offensive, joke (*ibid.*:4).



The answer to Moerman's question might be that, if an exotic actor listened to a recording of an American pre-invitation and studied a transcript of that conversation, it might be possible for that outsider to recognise the context free characteristics of the exchange. One might say that, depending on the indexical particulars of the situation, questions from one young person about another young person's plans for a forthcoming holiday are often designed to discover whether that second young person is free to engage in some as yet unspecified activity. Such pre-sequences are widely used and actors who do not take advantage of the opportunity to declare that they are busy should not be surprised if the questioner interprets the absence of any plans for a specific occasion as implicating no objection to an invitation (Davidson 1984; Levinson 1983; Wootton 1989). Hence, invitations commonly follow pre-invitations, and these are context free mechanisms that all competent actors recognise.

To determine the *type* of invitation that might be forthcoming and the indexical nature of that invitation, however, does require context sensitive knowledge and this is where the outsider faces embarrassment or worse. Levinson (1983) and other texts in pragmatics and discourse analysis have not generally described the context sensitive application of the mechanisms that Conversation Analysis has identified, and they have most noticeably failed to do so in their accounts of preference organization. They have, instead, heavily emphasised the context free working of the system, with the consequence that teachers who follow the existing model of preference organization give their students a partial understanding of the mechanism and thereby risk making 'cultural dopes' of them (Garfinkel 1967:66-75). This important point will be elaborated

in the next section, which will examine the way in which Sacks' successors have interpreted and evaluated the concept of preference.

## Chapter Three

### 3. Interpretations and Evaluations of Preference Organisation

This thesis has argued that conversation analysis has become separated from its ethnomethodological roots and that, as a result, it is rare for conversation analysts to employ the common-sense practices of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, or the reciprocity of perspectives in their discussion and analysis of data. It has claimed that because the underlying theoretical assumptions of conversation analysis have not been explained, readers new to the field are denied a full understanding of the process of analysis, and are handicapped in their efforts to undertake research. It has contended that the suggestion that the neophyte conversation analyst is capable of both identifying a 'candidate phenomenon' and analysing it (Moerman 1988:36; Pomerantz and Fehr 1997) is an over-optimistic one. More specifically, with reference to the concept of preference, this work has claimed that the failure to discuss the significance of both 'context free' and 'context sensitive' applications of preference (Sacks *et al.* 1974:699-700) has given rise to a distorted interpretation of the meaning of preference. It has also claimed that the lack of attention paid to ethnomethodology by some contemporary conversation analysts has resulted in some increasingly 'thin' description (Geertz 1973:3-30) and some suspect analysis, particularly in connection with preference organization. These arguments, claims and contentions will now be substantiated by means of an examination of the best known accounts of preference organization and of the effects of these accounts



on their readers.

Preference organization is a 'difficult' concept (Mazeland *et al.* 1995:292), and when debating any contentious issue in conversation analysis, reference to the work of Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b) is a fundamental requirement. This is because Sacks was one of those rare individuals who can rightly claim to be the 'inventor' of a field of study (Sacks 1992b:549), and whose work is seminal and unchallenged. His premature death, however, left certain aspects of his rich invention incomplete and open to interpretation by others. From the time of his death in 1975 until the publication of his collected lectures in 1992, researchers relied for clarification on a number of published papers, on restricted access to his unpublished papers, and on the work of Sacks' collaborators and friends, such as Garfinkel, Schegloff, and Jefferson. In some cases, as, for example, with pre-sequences (Sacks 1992a:302-5, 685-691), there was a sufficient foundation on which others could build (Levinson 1983:345-364), but this was not so with preference organisation. Although Levinson (1983) had access to unpublished work by Sacks, his brilliant exegesis of conversation analysis failed to fully elucidate the meaning of preference organisation for his wide readership; and Bilmes' (1988) restricted use of Sacks' lectures resulted in a paper that is widely cited, but considerably less illuminating than Levinson's work. Other researchers, such as Heritage (1984a) and Taylor and Cameron (1987), have added dimensions to preference organisation that serve to distract attention from its essential meaning. It is because not one of these four distinguished and well-known works provides a consistently clear and comprehensive account of preference organisation that it is essential to return to the sources of preference organisation and to the work

of Harvey Sacks and his ethnomethodological predecessors.

Preference organisation has not only been interpreted differently by leading scholars, but its importance has been evaluated differently. Levinson (1983), whose description and discussion of conversation analysis has been highly influential, devotes about thirteen pages to the subject of preference organisation and refers to the concept throughout his chapter on *Conversational Structure* (Levinson 1983:284-369). Psathas (1995), however, who has written not only the most recent introduction to conversation analysis, but what should also be, in view of his background and academic standing, one of the most authoritative works on the subject, makes no mention whatsoever of preference organisation. Given such contrasting evaluations, it is not surprising that less eminent students of conversation analysis are unclear about the nature and importance of preference organisation. The purpose of the following sections is to examine four major sources of the misunderstanding that surrounds preference organisation and to argue that it is the writers' neglect of the ethnomethodological roots of the subject that is the principal cause of that confusion. The sources held responsible and discussed below are Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), Taylor and Cameron (1987), and Bilmes (1988), and they are discussed in chronological order, because each later publication refers to one or more of the earlier ones.

### **3.1 *Levinson (1983)***

The appeal of Levinson's work on conversation analysis is that it is not only clear, succinct, and theoretically compelling, but that it is also very practical, because



Levinson (1983) provides a rigorous and detailed analysis of a number of conversational interactions. However, this thesis will argue that although Levinson's argument is highly persuasive, it provides only a very partial understanding of preference organization. Many readers of Levinson (1983), however, have accepted his account as definitive and have passed his misrepresentations on to their students (Cook 1989; Mey 1994; Nunan 1993; Yule 1996).

Levinson's (1983) most prominent contribution to the discussion of preference organisation is his linking of preference and markedness. Although Sacks (1992a:310-311) had hinted at such a connection in a lecture delivered sixteen years before Levinson's work appeared, and although he and others had repeated it in later work (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977; Pomerantz 1978; Atkinson and Drew 1979), it was Levinson (1983) who brought this connection to a wide readership. This thesis will argue, however, that while such a linkage is interesting, it is also fortuitous, unnecessary, and misleading.

In describing the link, Levinson (1983:307) says that preference

is a structural notion that corresponds closely to the linguistic concept of **markedness**. In essence, preferred seconds are **unmarked** - they occur as structurally simpler turns; in contrast dispreferred seconds are **marked** by various kinds of structural complexity. Thus dispreferred seconds are typically delivered: (a) after some significant delay; (b) with some preface marking their dispreferred status, often the particle *well*; (c) with some account of why the preferred second cannot be performed.

It is the remarkable aptness of this parallel and Levinson's skilful exploitation of it that



has led some researchers to imply that morphological markedness is a criterial feature of preferred and dispreferred responses. For Levinson (1983), though, it is only a striking parallel and not an identification, but such is the skill with which he makes his case that the unwary reader is easily tempted to take his earlier statement that preference is 'a label for a structural phenomenon very close to the linguistic concept of markedness' (*Ibid.*:332-333) too literally. Levinson's (1983) skill is evident in the clarity with which he illustrates, and then describes, the structure of marked and unmarked second pair parts.

Consider the following pair of invitations and responses:

*Atkinson & Drew, 1979 : 58*

A: Why don't you come up and see me some // times

B: // I would like to

*Atkinson & Drew, 1979 : 58*

A: Uh if you'd care to come and visit a little while this morning  
I'll give you a cup of coffee

B: hehh Well that's awfully sweet of you  
((DELAY)) ((MARKER)) ((APPRECIATION))  
I don't think I can make it this morning  
((REFUSAL or DECLINATION))  
.hh uhm I'm running an ad in the paper and-and uh I have to stay near  
the phone.  
((ACCOUNT))

Levinson (1983:334) then observes that

the invitation in the first example has an acceptance as a second part: the acceptance is of simple design and is delivered not only without delay but actually in partial overlap. In contrast, the invitation in the second example receives a refusal or declination as a second, and here we have all the typical features of dispreferreds, namely ... delay, the particle *Well* which standardly prefaces and marks dispreferreds ..., an appreciation (notably absent from the acceptance in the prior example), a qualified or mitigated refusal (*I don't think*

*I can*), and an account or explanation for the dispreferred second.

In this quotation, Levinson (1983:334) makes two rather sweeping claims: he refers to the 'typical features of dispreferreds,' rather than to the 'typical features of dispreferred responses to invitations,' and he suggests that 'the particle *Well* ... standardly marks dispreferred' responses. What is misleading here is that Levinson's (1983) examples of the link between preference and markedness are drawn from a very small number of utterances and responses, such as invitations, requests, and blamings, but he allows the reader to infer that most dispreferred responses are accompanied by the features he has described. He talks about the typical features of dispreferreds, when the most that he can claim is that these features of markedness accompany a small number of actions. They are not typical of the majority of dispreferred responses, as this thesis will demonstrate.

More seriously, he allows the student of conversation analysis to believe that, if a person were to undertake research, then these features of markedness would be criterial in determining the preference organization in those actions that have not yet been described in the literature. The neophyte is led to believe that a dispreferred response requires delays, markers, appreciations, refusals, and accounts, and that without a number of these features, a response may not be described as dispreferred. That belief, in fact, may be one reason why the current list of preferred and dispreferred responses (Kotthoff 1993; Mey 1993; Yule 1996) is as small today as it was a decade ago (Levinson 1983). Researchers have been shackled by the belief that the dispreferred response should appear in a marked form.



Having allowed the reader to infer that markedness is criterial in the determination of preference organisation, Levinson (1983:339-342) then quietly demonstrates the inaccuracy of such an inference, and he does this by discussing examples of preference organisation in which markedness is no longer of central importance. Levinson (1983:339-342) moves from a consideration of preferred second pair parts to a review of preferred sequences and, in order to illustrate how such sequences work, he describes the work of Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) on the organisation of repair. This research shows that there is a preferred ordering of repair in which the most preferred action is self-initiated self-repair and the least preferred is other-initiated other-repair. The evidence for this ranking, says Levinson (1983:341-342),

is, first, that this corresponds to the ranking from the most frequently used to the least used resource, (other-repair, for example, being really quite rare in conversation). Secondly, the system is actually set up so that there will be a tendency for self-initiated self-repair, this being the type of repair relevant in the first two opportunities traversed. Thirdly, we have the typical delay by recipient following these two opportunities if they're not immediately utilized, indicating a 'problem' and inviting self-initiated self-repair.

In this description of preference organisation in repair, markedness has been relegated to a subordinate role and references to 'the typical features of dispreferreds' (Levinson 1983:334) no longer dominate the argument. Instead, frequency of occurrence is now a more prominent guide to the identification of preferred and dispreferred actions. Levinson (1983:343) acknowledges this change by saying that, 'We have now widened the scope of preference organization to cover not only rankings of alternative turns, but alternative solutions to problems (like the handling of repair).' What he does not



explain, however, is how preference, which was earlier 'a structural notion that corresponds closely to the linguistic concept of markedness' (Levinson 1983:307), has come to be connected, in the case of repair, with the most frequently used resource (Levinson 1983:341), and neither does he suggest what it might be linked with in future analyses.

Having argued that both markedness and frequency of occurrence are key features of preference, Levinson (1983:334-336) introduces a third major feature: recurrent and reliable patterns of occurrence.

Given a structural characterisation of preferred and dispreferred turns we can then correlate the content and the sequential position of such turns with the tendency to produce them in a preferred or dispreferred format. And here we find recurrent and reliable patterns, e.g. refusals of requests or invitations are nearly always in dispreferred format, acceptances in preferred format. Table 6.1 indicates the sort of consistent match between format and content found across a number of adjacency pair seconds (Levinson 1983:336).

Table 6.1 *Correlations of content found across a number of adjacency pair seconds.*

FIRST PARTS:					
	Request	Offer/Invite	Assessment	Question	Blame
SECOND PARTS:					
<i>Preferred:</i>	acceptance	acceptance	agreement	expected answer	denial
<i>Dispreferred:</i>	refusal	refusal	disagreement	unexpected answer or non-answer	admission

Although Levinson (1983:336) claims no more than that there is a 'consistent match between format and content found across a number of adjacency pair seconds,' this well known table and the list of 'typical features' of dispreferreds have contributed to the mistaken belief that dispreferred responses, while skilfully and purposefully constructed, are nevertheless somewhat formulaic and predictable. They have also contributed to the misleading idea that the scope of preference organisation is perhaps limited to the number of speech acts that can be described, e.g. 'inviting,' 'complimenting,' 'assessing,' 'complaining,' and so on.

The problem for the student of this subject is that when she begins to collect data of her own, she quickly finds that while common sense might suggest that certain utterances are dispreferred, they may not in fact be marked as dispreferred. Therefore, if markedness is used as the criterion by which preferred and dispreferred responses are to be identified, the conflict between what common sense suggests and what markedness suggests will be a frequent one. Furthermore, if the preferred and dispreferred responses have not been catalogued on a table such as Levinson's (1983:336), and if there is also a conflict between common sense and markedness, to whom or to what does the student appeal for clarification?

This latter point is illustrated very well by Heritage (1984a:126-127) who argues that there are not enough rules or tables to prepare actors for even a small number of the actions that they will encounter.

For vast areas of social conduct, no rules of action at all are formulated or entertained by the participants - let alone drawn upon in devising courses of



action. To illustrate this contention, consider the following from Pomerantz (1980).

A: Yer line's been busy.

B: Yeah my fu(hh)! .hh my father's wife called me ...

In this extract from the early part of a telephone conversation, the first speaker (A) asserts 'limited knowledge' of a 'known to B' event. Whereupon the second speaker (B) gives a fairly extended description of the event in question. This kind of sequence is fairly common in conversation ..., and undergraduate students, when presented with only the first line of the datum, routinely describe it as 'fishing for' or soliciting the information that is subsequently provided. Yet although most speakers (including probably A in the datum above) would, in the event of the looked-for information not being forthcoming, treat that outcome as a kind of 'withholding', we know of no rule which runs to the effect: if someone asserts 'limited knowledge' of a 'known-to-you' event, tell them what you know. Children are not instructed in such a rule, neither is it listed in books of etiquette. Before Pomerantz described the phenomenon it was, in this sense, 'unknown'. Yet, to repeat, it is an extremely regular phenomenon. It is strongly patterned and will support 'accountability' inferences although, since the information is not specifically requested, its 'withholding' is, correspondingly, not the object of overt sanctions (Heritage 1984a:126-127).

The example Heritage (*Ibid.*) offers is of a preferred response to A's 'fishing device,' but the action he describes and the alternative responses to it are not listed on any table of the sort that Levinson (1983:336) has prepared. B's response in the data extract above is unmarked and preferred, but an unmarked, *dispreferred* response is easily imaginable. Consider the following example, which is taken from an interview on a radio programme in the United Kingdom. The male interviewer (A) is a critic of art and architecture and he is talking to a male architect (B).

[RF:I:89:4:1]

A: With me is (Stuart Moscrop) who's the designer and architect of the Museum. It seems to be er (1.0) pleasantly modernist. Can I call it that? =

B: =Call it what you like. If that's what it seems to you that's fine. The thing to remember is that this building's been here for (.) I mean nearly forty years. Basically, what you're looking at is the existing building as a bridge over Shad Thames with its terraces onto the river and what we've done



is to protect the existing brickwork (.) we've kept the original openings in the building, these windows that you're looking at now (.) through onto River Thames (.) protected the brickwork with a skin of render and we've painted that white.

A: What does white have that pink polka dots don't?

B: =Well it is the trademark of of straight modernist er you know architecture and late twentieth century design. It is the most neutral classical colour for the display of other (.) display or housing of other activities or objects and three there's a perfectly erm respectable English tradition of water that is riverside or seaside twentieth century buildings coloured white. And I suppose given those three you don't need to look for a fourth.

A: You've created a very (.) beautiful building, a very seductive building. You're going to be surrounded here by new apartment blocks, a hotel, lots of shopping malls ...

Before the interview, A had informed the radio audience that he would be interviewing the man responsible for designing 'a building that hopes to become one of London's best known design landmarks.' According to Manes (1983:96-97), work, effort, appearance, and attitudes are the objects of our praise, and the designer of an attractive new building could expect to be complimented on his work as an architect, on the effort he had put into designing the building in question, or on the appearance of the building.

It would be polite and appropriate, therefore, for such an interview to begin with a compliment and A's utterance, 'It seems to be er (1.0) pleasantly modernist,' satisfies Wolfson's (1981, 1983) criteria for the identification of a compliment, albeit an indirect one. Pomerantz (1978:97-98) says that there is a preference for agreement with indirect compliments, although they are likely to be scaled-down agreements, 'the scale-down reflecting the constraints imposed by indirect praise of recipient.'

Accordingly, B's response, 'Call it what you like,' has the unmarked form of a preferred

second pair part and it is latched on to A's turn (Levinson 1983:307). There is no delay, no marker, no rejection, no account, and no indication of any kind that it is anything other than an unmarked, preferred response. The student who applies the criterion of markedness to the identification of preferred and dispreferred responses would therefore be obliged to identify this response as unmarked and preferred. However, B's response is directed not to A's 'compliment,' but to A's question, 'Can I call it that?' (Sacks 1987), and this particular response is in the shape of a formula which is widely recognised by native speakers as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with a prior assessment. The actor's common-sense understanding conflicts, therefore, with Levinson's dictum, and so does the interviewer's, because his third turn displays a clear interpretation of the architect's response. It shows that A has not taken B's response to his assessment as being a preferred response, despite its unmarked character, because, in his third turn, he sets about repairing the effects of his opening assessment.

In undertaking this repair, A not only rephrases his assessment of B's work, but he strongly upgrades it. His second assessment, 'a very beautiful building, a very seductive building,' is positive and unqualified and there is no hedging in his choice of verb. He replaces the semantically weak phrase 'pleasantly modernist' with the much stronger adjectives 'beautiful' and 'seductive' and he stresses both words. The term 'modernist' is dropped, because when applied to a new and important building called 'The Design Museum,' it is perhaps an unflatteringly obvious descriptor. Its use might suggest an inability or reluctance to find other features of the building which are more worthy of praise.



In the absence of markedness as an indicator of a dispreferred response, how can a student of conversation analysis say that any utterance represents a dispreferred response? The answer that ethnomethodology puts forward is that the dispreferred response may be the accountable or reportable response (Garfinkel 1967); it is the response that poses the question, "Why that now?" (Bilmes 1985; Sacks 1992a:542; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). For the museum designer who was the addressee in the above conversation, for the analyst who studies the conversation, and for the actor who overhears it, *B*'s third turn utterance, 'You've created a very (.) beautiful building, a very seductive building,' is reportable and accountable and it gives rise to the question, "Why that now?" Why, having paid the architect a compliment in his first turn, does the interviewer pay him a much stronger compliment in his third turn? And why does he pay that stronger compliment in his third turn and not in his fifth or eighth or twelfth? The answer that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis offer is that the transcript of the conversation shows that the radio interviewer analyzes the architect's response to his assessment and he decides that it is a dispreferred response. This is only apparent because he displays his analysis to the architect, and to the overhearing radio audience in his third turn, when he offers a second and stronger compliment to the architect. Actors are morally accountable for their actions, and they constantly monitor talk in order to see what understandings of prior utterances are displayed in subsequent utterances. They may detect a dispreferred response, as it is claimed that *A* did in the data extract above, and they may choose to repair it, and to display their understanding of earlier utterances and their accountability for their actions. On the other hand, an actor may detect a dispreferred response to an earlier utterance, but may choose not to repair it. However, if this actor



fails to initiate repair, he or she will be held accountable for that failure and appropriate inferences will be drawn about his or her behaviour.

The nature and operation of accountability will be explored thoroughly in the discussion of preference. This thesis will argue that the connection between markedness and the preferred and dispreferred responses to a small number of actions is an adventitious coincidence, and it will demonstrate that preferred and dispreferred actions can be identified satisfactorily without reference to markedness. It will argue that accountability not only renders any reference to markedness largely unnecessary, but that it also provides a comprehensive account of preference, and this is something that the markedness cannot do. The latter misleads the reader by implying that what occurs in a small number of cases occurs in all.

There is a second way in which Levinson (1983) allows the reader to infer that what is true in certain circumstances is true in all, and that is concerned with his table of 'recurrent and reliable patterns' of preferred and dispreferred responses to requests, invitations, assessments, and a small number of other actions (Levinson 1983:336). Common sense suggests that the patterns presented are generally true, and that actors do indeed recognise that requests are often followed by unmarked acceptances, and that invitations are frequently declined in a marked fashion. However, these are the context-free patterns which are part of our schematic knowledge, not the context-sensitive patterns which we create and observe others creating (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Levinson (1983) misleads the reader by not making a distinction between context-free and context-sensitive actions, and by allowing the reader to conclude that

the forms of preferred and dispreferred actions that he has described as 'recurrent and reliable patterns' are indeed widely applicable. In doing so, he risks making 'cultural dopes' of his readers and of their students by treating them as passive followers of rules, rather than as active and creative individuals who attend to the indexical particulars of a situation and to the sequential unfolding of talk, as the radio interviewer in the above extract did. In following Levinson (1983), we do our students a disservice not only in offering them convenient, but unreliable, generalisations, but also in failing to show them how much richer and more useful the subject of preference is when it is treated as having both context-free and context-sensitive applications.

The widespread belief that markedness is criterial in determining preference and that the preferred and dispreferred forms of actions can be identified and catalogued like specimens in entomology not only distorts our understanding of the concept of preference, but it also greatly restricts it. Levinson (1983) has simply not identified enough specimens of this sort and preference is consequently made to seem like a very small field. The 'recurrent and reliable patterns' continue to be taught to students of applied linguistics (Mey 1993; Yule 1996), but the concept is becoming a footnote in the field of conversation analysis (Mazeland *et al.* 1995:292; Tsui 1994).

No clear and accurate picture of the extent and nature of preference organisation emerges from Levinson's account. The argument of this thesis is that such understanding will remain elusive so long as authorities such as Levinson (1983) fail to show their readers the relationship between the ethnomethodological programme of enquiry and conversation analysis. Without such a theoretical foundation, concepts



such as preference are bound to remain rootless and occasional features of spoken interaction. The student therefore needs a text which will show that while conversation analysis is an eminently empirical discipline which eschews premature theory construction, it nevertheless has strong theoretical foundations and that if those foundations are ignored, the significance of its findings is greatly diminished. The most promising source of such understanding is the work of John Heritage (1984a), because Heritage is not only a leading authority on the ethnomethodological movement, but also a distinguished conversation analyst.

### ***3.2 Heritage (1984a)***

Heritage (1984a) has been described as 'the most comprehensive and analytically refined text on ethnomethodology ever published' (Czyzewski 1989:43), and this work is designed to show how the complex theoretical foundations of phenomenology and ethnomethodology culminate in the impressive practical edifice of conversation analysis. Thus, the reader could expect to find in these pages the definitive account of preference organisation. Indeed, in the first seven chapters of his nine-chapter work, Heritage (1984a) provides such an absorbing account of ethnomethodology that Czyzewski's (1989:43) praise seems faint. However, in the eighth and longest chapter of the book, that on Conversation Analysis, something unusual occurs. The powerful and insightful instrument of ethnomethodological enquiry that Heritage (1984a) has so painstakingly described is largely abandoned in favour of orthodox sociological analysis, and the intellectual momentum of the book is lost. The reader's expectation that the phenomenological and ethnomethodological concepts of indexicality,



reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives will be used to elucidate the nature of conversation is profoundly disappointed.

This disappointment is almost immediate, because Heritage's (1984a:232-293) fifteen-page discussion of preference organisation begins in the following way:

In the present section of this chapter, we will briefly illustrate a variety of ways in which the design of actions can contribute to the maintenance of social solidarity. Anticipating the results of this discussion, it will be suggested that there is a 'bias' intrinsic to many aspects of the organization of talk which is generally favourable to the maintenance of bonds of solidarity between actors and which promotes the avoidance of conflict (Heritage 1984a:265).

Thus, instead of focusing on the many ways in which actors establish and reproduce a sense of social order through talk, Heritage (1984a) is distracted by questions of motivation and structural regularity. His primary concern appears to be the sociological question of *why* individuals act as they do, rather than the ethnomethodological question of *how* actors achieve their objectives, and in taking this approach Heritage (1984a) follows Levinson (1983) in invoking 'politeness' and 'face' as explanations.

Heritage's introduction to preference organisation (Heritage 1984a:265-280) begins with a description of the structural characteristics of preferred and dispreferred second pair parts, which is based on the work of Atkinson and Drew (1979) and Levinson (1983), and these are the characteristics associated with markedness, such as delays, markers, refusals, and accounts, for the dispreferred response, and the absence of any of these features for the immediate, unmarked, preferred response.

The shift in perspective from ethnomethodology to sociology becomes more pronounced when Heritage (1984a:267) says

Actions which are characteristically performed straightforwardly and without delay are termed 'preferred' actions, while those which are delayed, qualified and accounted for are termed 'dispreferred'. To avoid any confusion, it should be asserted immediately that these terms are not intended to refer to the private desires, or psychological proclivities of speakers. On the contrary, we are here dealing with highly generalized and, as we shall see, institutionalized methods of speaking.

In view of the quality of Heritage's work in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis and the praise it has received, it is perhaps surprising that Heritage (1984a) has not only accepted Levinson's (1983) account of preference so uncritically, but that he has accorded 'sociological, or even sociologistic, interpretation to conversation-analytic research of 'preference organization' ' rather than ethnomethodological interpretation (Czyzewski 1989:52). The last sentence in the quotation above illustrates this process, because it appears to represent a retreat from the ethnomethodological objective of 'discovering the formal properties of commonplace, practical common sense actions, "from within" actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings' (Garfinkel 1967:viii), in favour of the orthodox, Parsonian representation of actors as rule-following 'judgmental dopes' (Garfinkel 1967:66-69).

The concern caused by this retreat from the ethnomethodological position is heightened in the next sentence when Heritage (1984a:267) states that

these systematic patternings of the design of particular actions are



fundamentally tied to the actions themselves and they vary little in relation to particular speakers or social contexts.

The natural consequence of such a view is the construction of a table showing the preferred and dispreferred responses for any given actions, and Heritage (1984a:269) provides one that is very similar to that produced by Levinson (1983:336).

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PREFERENCE FORMAT OF SOME SELECTED ACTION TYPES

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Action	Preferred Format Response	Dispreferred Format Response
Request	Acceptance	Refusal
Offer/invitation	Acceptance	Refusal
Assessment	Agreement	Disagreement
Self-deprecation	Disagreement	Agreement
Accusation/blaming	Denial	Admission

---

(Heritage 1984a:269)

From this table, Heritage (1984a:270) selects the preferred and dispreferred responses to offers, invitations, and requests for closer examination, and he claims that 'a priori, none of these projects acceptance and rejection as equivalent actions. On the contrary, each projects acceptance as the action to be accomplished next.' Heritage therefore follows Levinson (1983) in describing the context-free workings of preference, while ignoring the context-sensitive operation of the system. He does not allow for the fact that an invitation, for example, could project a refusal as 'the action to be accomplished next' or as the 'preferred' action. Furthermore, Heritage (1984a),



like Levinson (1983), misleads the reader, albeit unintentionally, by providing only a partial account of the system of preference, while allowing the reader to think that it is a comprehensive account. In doing so, Heritage temporarily overlooks the ethnomethodological belief that what an action projects

cannot be decided by an auditor unless he knows or assumes something about the biography and the purposes of the speaker, the circumstances of the utterance, the previous course of the conversation, or the particular relationship of actual or potential interaction that exists between user and auditor. The expressions do not have a sense that remains identical through the changing occasions of their use (Garfinkel 1967:40).

Preference, therefore, is something to be determined in use, and this can be illustrated with the example of invitations. In Brunei, at the time of writing, the principal Muslim holiday of the year is approaching and during this holiday Muslims invite relatives, friends and acquaintances to their homes, and the invitations often extend to non-Muslim foreigners. Given the fact that, in my own case, for example, the presence of a middle-aged, European, Christian, non-Malay speaking male in a Malay home might cause some guests to feel uncomfortable, the offer of an appropriate excuse for not accepting the invitation might well be the preferred response, although other actors with different biographies might see acceptance as the preferred response. Wolfson (1983b) has discussed a type of invitation that is common in the United States and that is issued on the assumption that it will not be treated simply as an invitation. She notes that it is not readily recognized by non-Americans as something less than invitation and that it can cause embarrassment and ill-feeling. Hence, the nature of the response that an action projects is determined by the contextual features, because 'every use of "context" without exception is itself

essentially indexical' (Garfinkel 1967:10).

The retreat from the ethnomethodological approach to the analysis of conversation continues when Heritage (1984a:269) turns his attention to the role of preferred and dispreferred responses.

Preferred format actions are normally affiliative in character while dispreferred format actions are disaffiliative. Similarly, while preferred format actions are generally supportive of social solidarity, dispreferred format actions are destructive of it. As we shall see, the uniform recruitment of specific features of turn design to preferred and dispreferred action types is probably related to their affiliative and disaffiliative characters (Heritage 1984a:269).

The remainder of the chapter entitled "Conversation Analysis" is a justification of this claim. Despite pursuing this sociological objective, Heritage (1984a:291) concludes his chapter on conversation analysis by saying that 'Conversation analysis in fact represents a vast extension - in both scope and detail - of the basic theorem of accountable action presented in chapter 5.' The reader, however, while admiring the exceptional quality of Heritage's exposition in chapter five, can only wonder what he is referring to. Instead of invoking indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives to explain how preference works, Heritage concentrates on the social function and motivation of preference. As such, Heritage's discussion of conversation analysis is quite divorced from the preceding chapters of the book, because he fails to demonstrate clearly the connection between ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and preference organization.



In fairness to Heritage, however, it should be pointed out that Clayman and Maynard (1995:1) offer a more knowledgeable and more generous interpretation of his work. They say that Heritage (1984a) 'reviews the central methodological principles and substantive findings of conversation analytic research within the framework of a broader discussion of ethnomethodology, although the relations between them remain largely implicit in his account.' Czyzewski (1989:50) reaches much the same conclusion when he says of Heritage (1984a) that 'the manifold multiplicity of members' methods of making their actions accountable is kept in the background.' This thesis has already argued that 'the majority of those who are involved in conversation analysis are sociologists who are very much aware of the social philosophy which underlies the practice' (Williams 1992:148), and that implicit theories and implicit connections are not enough when the audience comes to include applied linguists and language teachers. Although Heritage (1984a) makes no explicit reference to his intended audience, numerous citations in papers in conversation analysis direct readers to his work. Furthermore, given the title of the book and the size and positioning of the chapter on conversation analysis, the reader has a right perhaps to expect that the relations between the ethnomethodology and conversation will be made explicit. Some readers, in fact, turn to Heritage (1984a) solely for the chapter on conversation analysis, and it is possible for them to read that chapter and to learn very little about the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis. That represents a loss for both fields of study. Taylor and Cameron (1987) recognise the consequences of the separation of conversation analysis from its ethnomethodological roots, and they address that problem in the third text to be examined in this chapter.



### 3.3 Taylor and Cameron (1987)

This is the third of the four interpretations of preference organization to be discussed in this chapter. The current section will describe the contribution of Taylor and Cameron (1987) to the debate and will then comment on its relevance to applied linguistics and language teaching.

Whereas neither Levinson (1983) nor Heritage (1984a) discusses conversation analysis explicitly in terms of its ethnomethodological roots, Taylor and Cameron (1987) begin their chapter on "Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis" (Taylor and Cameron 1987:99-124) with a forceful statement of the link between the two.

It is an undeniable though rarely acknowledged fact that, shorn of its ethnomethodological underpinning, CA [conversation analysis] would be almost indistinguishable from such orthodox models of conversation as that of Edmonson, Stubbs or Coulthard. It is Garfinkelian principles which give life to the distinctive methodology characteristic of CA. Although in recent years some of its practitioners have attempted to distance themselves from any association with Garfinkel, picturing CA as an atheoretical, inductive, autonomous method of analysis, it will be our argument ... that the many strengths of CA, as well as its weaknesses, are to be attributed to the original Garfinkelian principles on which CA is founded (*ibid.*:99-100).

Although Taylor and Cameron (1987) discuss the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis at some length, they appear to rely on four secondary sources for their understanding of the work of Schutz, Garfinkel, and Sacks, with the result that their work reflects the predispositions inherent in the sources they use. Those sources are Atkinson and Drew (1979), Owen (1983), Levinson (1983), and Heritage (1984a),

and this thesis has already argued that the two latter sources, upon which Taylor and Cameron (1987) are most reliant, provide only a partial picture of preference organization. Furthermore, throughout the chapter, Taylor and Cameron (1987) attribute opinions and arguments to unnamed sources, such as 'some of its practitioners' (*Ibid.*:99) or 'as some would wish' (*Ibid.*:113) or 'many ethnomethodologists' (*Ibid.*:116), and, as a number of these attributions are contentious, this detracts from the clarity of their work.

Taylor and Cameron (1987:111) begin their discussion of preference organisation by announcing that it is based on Heritage (1984a) and Levinson (1983).

The most authoritative recent discussions of preference systems (Heritage, 1984a; Levinson 1983) reach a consensus on how the notion of preference should be conceived.

The consensus that Taylor and Cameron present to their readers concerns the relationship between requests, invitations, and a few other speech acts and the appearance of the responses to these speech acts in either marked or unmarked form. Taylor and Cameron do not comment on the fact that Atkinson and Heritage (1979), Owen (1983), Levinson (1983), and Heritage (1984a) all quote the same small number of speech acts and all use very similar examples, and neither do they raise questions about the operation of preference in actions beyond the small number described. Although they later criticize the accounts of Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1984a), they do so from a narrow standpoint, having already accepted that a dispreferred response is a marked response.



Having discussed preference and markedness, Taylor and Cameron (1987) introduce a criticism of the connection between the two.

Recently, however, some of the leading practitioners of CA have begun to acknowledge that the differences between preferred and dispreferred actions cannot simply be reduced to distinctions in their formal design (cf. Owen, 1983, chapter 5; Heritage, 1984a, pp. 268ff.). Thus, more and more it is being accepted that preference cannot be a purely structural concept but must, to avoid incoherence, be re-interpreted under a functional explanation (Taylor and Cameron 1987:113).

They justify their claim in the following way:

Speakers would *prefer* (in the ordinary sense of the term) not to have been put in the position (by the first speaker's production of the first pair part) where they have to decline to produce the second pair part that the first speakers obviously would have preferred (again, in its ordinary sense) to hear. Consequently, they delay performing the act that they would rather not do, or they accompany it by an apology, or by an excuse, or mitigation, and so on. 'Preference' is, in fact, a perfectly appropriate term to use to refer to the differences between two alternative moves; what is inappropriate (not to say disingenuous) is to attempt to maintain the early ethnomethodological claim that those differences are purely formal, with no basis in the truly psychological or functional sense of 'preference' (Taylor and Cameron 1987:114).

There are two points to make in response to this quotation. One is that Garfinkel's (1967) work, with its emphasis on the indexical nature of any utterance, clearly refutes any suggestion that ethnomethodologists would claim that differences in the operation of any mechanism are 'purely formal.' The other is that Sacks (1992a, 1992b) has demonstrated repeatedly that the first pair part in an adjacency pair is designed to elicit a particular response. If we use the 'architecture of intersubjectivity' metaphor, to which Taylor and Cameron refer, it seems reasonable to assume that something 'matching' or 'completing' that design is 'preferred' ('architecturally' or 'structurally')



preferred, rather than psychologically preferred). An invitation, as any actor knows, can be designed to elicit a refusal (which would then be preferred) as well as an acceptance.

In an attempt to show not only that there is confusion surrounding the notion of preference, but that the whole conversation analytic enterprise is flawed, Taylor and Cameron (1987) re-analyze a data extract from Levinson (1983). What they succeed in doing in their re-analysis, however, is demonstrating that their reading of secondary sources has left them with an inadequate understanding of the principles of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. They begin by quoting Levinson (1983):

T1 C: So I was wondering would you be in your office on Monday  
(.) by any chance?  
T2 (2.0)  
T3 C: Probably not  
T4 R: Hmm yes=  
T5 C: =You would?  
T6 R: Ya  
T7 C: So if we came by could you give us ten minutes of your time?  
(From Levinson, 1983, p. 320)

Levinson comments as follows on this extract.

Here a two-second pause after the question in T1 is actually taken by C to indicate a (negative) answer to the question. How can this come about? Note first that ... C has selected R to speak (...). Therefore the two-second pause is not just anyone's pause (i.e. a lapse): rather it assigned by the (turn-taking) system to R as R's silence. Then recollect that adjacency pairs can have dispreferred seconds, these in general being marked by delay (amongst other features). Therefore the pause can be heard as a preface to a dispreferred response. Now in full sequential context it is clear that C's question is a prelude to a request for an appointment, and for such questions it turns out that negative answers (answers that block the requests) are dispreferred. Hence C draws the inference from R's silence that he makes explicit in T3. (That he got it wrong, as indicated by R in T4, does not affect the point - such inferences are made, often incorrectly, though sometimes not.) (Taylor and Cameron 1987:119).

Taylor and Cameron (1987) claim that there is no evidence within the above conversation to justify Levinson's interpretation of it, and that he is relying instead on intuition. They argue that 'these apparent analytical successes are dependent upon the analyst's stepping beyond the methodological limits allowed by the underlying ethnomethodological principles' (*Ibid.*:120). They seem to believe that unless a speaker, in a subsequent turn, actually 'formulates' the meaning of an utterance in a prior turn (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970), by saying, "You mean X," then there is no 'criterion for determining whether a second turn displays an understanding of its first turn as an X, Y or Z' (Taylor and Cameron 1987:121). Thus, the conversation analyst

in attempting to apply in practice the principles of accountability and displayed intersubjectivity, is left to choose between (a) relying on intuition to identify the conversational work a turn is doing, a method the ethnomethodological approach was designed, at least in part, to improve or (b) abandoning any hope of identification, thanks to the infinite regress applying those principles entails (*Ibid.*:122).

The 'infinite regress' refers to their claim that 'what understanding a second turn displays would have to be determined by looking to third and fourth turns to see what they take the second turn to have displayed: i.e. to see the understandings they themselves display of the second turn's understanding display' (*Ibid.*).

Taylor and Cameron (1987:122-123) conclude their argument by saying that

What is surely most frustrating for the conversation analyst convinced of the strength of the ethnomethodological picture of interaction is that the dilemma presented to the analyst by the practical task of applying its fundamental principles is obviously of no import to conversationalists themselves. They are not hamstrung in their efforts to understand what each other say by always



having to defer their interpretations to a next turn that never arrives. If they were, then, given that they could never be certain what their partners were saying, conversational coherence would collapse. In conversations, we do feel that we understand what is being said to us and that we are being understood; yet if we were rigorously applying ethnomethodological principles we would not.

Garfinkel (1967) agrees that 'we do feel that we understand what is being said to us and that we are being understood' and, because of that, he devised experiments to reveal the methods that actors employ in creating and sustaining a sense of mutual understanding. His experiments, however, contradict Taylor and Cameron's (1987:123) final assertion and show, instead, that actors not only employ ethnomethodological principles quite rigorously, albeit unconsciously, but that they also censure those who do not. The ethnomethodological alternative to Taylor and Cameron's (1987) interpretation of Levinson's (1983) data would be that C understood R's two-second pause as a harbinger of a dispreferred response because he was not a 'cultural dope' (Garfinkel 1967:66-70). He did not 'bracket' the interaction in the manner of phenomenological investigators (Schutz 1962) and hear the utterance as 'context free' and as unrelated to previous utterances or previous actions. Instead, he treated the utterance as locally situated and locally produced and interpretable in terms of the ethnomethods of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives. He heard R's pause and he asked, "Why that now?", and then used his knowledge of the indexical details of the talk to proffer an interpretation of the pause.

This issue of finding 'evidence in the conversation itself' of a particular understanding (Taylor and Cameron 1987:120) is a source of debate within ethnomethodology and



conversation analysis. Graham Watson (1992:xxi) describes how, at a conference of researchers in these fields, there was a discussion of the way in which power is made evident in a conversation.

Some conference participants lamented what they identified as the neglect of this variable, especially in conversation analysis. They complained that while Deirdre Boden, in her keynote address, considered the transcripts of telephone conversations between President Kennedy and the Governor of Mississippi concerning the civil rights riots of 1962, she did not address the question of what it was that made these conversations ones between a president and a governor rather than between two housewives at a laundromat. In response, Boden protested that talk assumes context; talk and context elaborate each other; power is part and parcel of that context. Sharrock and Watson (1988, p. 64) implicitly endorse her stand, for they reject the analytical distinction between talk and the ethnography that lends sense to that talk. For them, ethnographic context is a constituent part of talk.

Taylor and Cameron (1987) are among those critics of conversation analysis who understand its focus on the context-free mechanisms of talk, but who do not see the context-sensitive applications of those mechanisms. They react negatively to 'the aridity of adjacency pair analysis' (G. Watson 1992:xx), as do many students of conversation analysis (Schiffrin 1994), because they consider that this form of analysis is unsatisfying and inadequate. In view of the connection that the work of Taylor and Cameron (1987) establishes between conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, one might expect that they would propose that conversation analysis receive some much needed reinvigoration from its ethnomethodological roots, but they do no such thing. Instead, their response is to shift the focus of the discussion of preference away from the issue of how we recognize preferred and dispreferred forms and how preference works, to a consideration of the function that it performs in interaction. The

effect of this is to leave unanswered the harder ethnomethodological question of *how* actors reach understandings, and to concentrate instead on the softer sociological question of *why* individuals behave as they do, and the latter question is noticeably more popular in the literature.

Although Taylor and Cameron's (1987) work is less widely cited than that of Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1984a), it is nevertheless important. One reason for its importance is that its functional interpretation of preference, and the description of markedness in preferred and dispreferred responses, have been accepted by Tsui (1994) as the most pertinent facts about preference organization. The consequence of this acceptance is that yet another major text in discourse analysis and applied linguistics is passing on, albeit briefly, the misunderstanding of preference to yet more readers. There appears to be no major text in either of the above fields that does not rely on Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), or Taylor and Cameron (1987) for its understanding of preference organization. It was the prevalence of the misunderstandings surrounding the notion of preference that prompted Bilmes (1988), the fourth and final authority to be discussed in this section, to attempt a clarification.



### 3.4 Bilmes (1988)

Unlike the three preceding accounts of preference, Bilmes (1988) appears in a journal rather than in a book. Its audience, therefore, is more specialized and, in a sense, more important. If a reader's interest in preference has been aroused by a reading of Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), or Taylor and Cameron (1987), and if that person searches through the ERIC or LLBA databases for further work, he or she finds that only one article in the past ten years appears to have addressed itself to the meaning of preference in conversation analysis. That work, of course, is Bilmes (1988). Furthermore, even the interested reader without access to databases would be aware of Bilmes (1988), because the work is frequently cited, as indeed it must be in view of its uniqueness.

Bilmes (1988) was attracted to the subject because he recognised that 'the concept of preference is one of the most general and frequently mentioned analytical notions in [Conversation Analysis]' (*Ibid.*:162). However, he saw that 'preference has ... been construed in a variety of mutually incompatible, and methodologically questionable ways,' and his intention was 'to present a clear and unitary concept of preference' (*Ibid.*:161). Had he succeeded, the concept would not still be described as 'difficult' (Mazeland *et al.* 1995:292) and a thesis such as this would not be necessary.

Although Bilmes (1988) is frequently cited, he is rarely quoted, and those textbook writers who refer to, or discuss, preference (Cook 1989, Mey 1993, Nunan 1993, Tsui 1994, Yule 1996) tend to rely instead on Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a) or Taylor



and Cameron (1987). When Bilmes (1988) is quoted, it tends to be for peripheral aspects of his work rather than for his discussion of preference (Gardner 1994).

It is curious then that an article which is entitled "The concept of preference in conversation analysis" and which appeared in an important journal in 1988 should be so neglected. Bilmes (1988) had the opportunity to answer the most important questions about preference and to displace earlier work, such as Levinson (1983) and Taylor and Cameron (1987). It might have become the standard work on the subject and it might have been widely quoted. Instead, two quite different things appear to have happened. The first, as suggested earlier, is that Bilmes (1988) has simply been bypassed and left in isolation as an academic point of reference. Those who have bypassed the work have continued to rely on Levinson (1983) for a general account of preference, and on Sacks and Schegloff for an understanding of the more specialised ways in which preference can operate (Sacks and Schegloff 1979; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977).

The second thing to have happened is that the publication of Bilmes (1988) appears to have brought academic debate about preference to a halt. Since 1988, nothing of significance seems to have been written on the subject, and yet Toolan (1989:263) believes that 'if current ethnomethodological conversation analysis stands or falls it will be on the basis of the coherence of the notion of preference and conditional relevance.' If preference really is as important as Toolan (1989:263) suggests, then the question inevitably arises of why Bilmes (1988) appears to have had so little positive effect on the debate. The answer that this thesis proposes is that Bilmes

(1988) is simply not at all easy to understand. His work has complicated the debate in unnecessary ways and has inhibited further study of preference. If preference is now construed as a difficult concept, part of the responsibility must be borne by Bilmes (1988).

There are three reasons why Bilmes (1988) is not easy to understand. The first is that while Bilmes makes it clear what he finds unsatisfactory in earlier work on preference, he fails to make explicit his own understanding of the notion. The second is that his arguments are based on evidence that is less than wholly convincing. The evidence he uses is drawn from the unpublished lectures of Harvey Sacks. Although approximately one hundred and sixty of these lectures were later published (Sacks 1992a, 1992b), Bilmes (1988) was writing at a time when a very much smaller number was available to researchers. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Bilmes (1988) based his discussion of preference on two lectures that perhaps reflected his anthropological interests, but they were in fact two of the least representative and least helpful in the entire collection. The result of this singular account of preference is that many readers would find considerable difficulty in using Bilmes' description of preference organization as a tool for identifying preference organization in any selection of conversational data. If the researcher cannot understand Bilmes' (1988) account of preference, then it is understandable that she should return to the readable, if not wholly representative, account of Levinson (1983). The justification of the claim that Bilmes (1988) chose unrepresentative discussions of preference from the lectures of Harvey Sacks will, however, be postponed until the next chapter, for the following reason. That chapter will discuss Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) work on preference, and the



discussion will provide a description of preference, and a background against which it will be possible both to show that Bilmes' choice of lectures was anomalous and to argue that the result of this choice has been discouraging for the reader.

The third reason why Bilmes (1988) can strike the reader as difficult is that there appear to be contradictions in his argument. One such contradiction follows this reference to Pomerantz (1984).

She suggests (1984) that preferred responses are those which are "invited". So, for example, invitations invite acceptances, which are therefore preferred. One problem with this notion is that she offers no independent criterion for determining what sort of response is invited. For instance, she claims that agreements with self-deprecations are dispreferred, but on what basis can we say that a negative self-appraisal does not invite agreement? Again, denials are preferred responses to accusations, but can we say that an accusation invites a denial rather than an admission? (Bilmes 1988:174).

The contradiction concerns the fact that Bilmes accuses Pomerantz of doing something which the reader can clearly see that Bilmes himself does routinely ('denial is the preferred response to an accusation' (Bilmes 1988:177)). Furthermore, having made the accusation he fails to explain its significance to the reader. The end of the quotation above is followed, not by a commentary, but by the introduction of a new topic. The relevance of this criticism and other criticisms is not made explicit for his readers, and it may be that Bilmes, the anthropologist and social scientist (Bilmes 1986, 1995), has simply misjudged his audience of sociolinguists and applied linguists.

Thus, there are grounds for claiming that Bilmes (1988) is not easy to understand, and the relative silence that has followed its publication is some evidence that this reader



is not alone in experiencing difficulty with Bilmes' account of preference. Although this thesis claims that Bilmes (1988) fails to clarify the meaning of preference, it cannot be denied that the article contains some telling criticisms of earlier work on the subject of preference. The remainder of this section will briefly recount those criticisms.

Bilmes (1988:170-172) begins what he calls a critical review of the literature on preference by noting the psychological explanations of preference organization which he claims have been offered by Atkinson and Drew (1979) and Owen (1983), and he restates the conversation analytic position that preference is 'a technical concept, not to be confused with psychological notions of what the participants may be thought to personally prefer' (Bilmes 1988:171). He explains that 'if there is a preference for denial after an accusation, it is a conversational preference and not a characterization of participants' motives' (*Ibid.* :172). As part of his criticism of the psychological argument, Bilmes (1988:174-175) also rejects the need for a functional justification of preference (Pomerantz 1984; Taylor and Cameron 1987). This is the argument which says that preference can be understood as the result of an underlying attempt to deal with 'face concerns' and to maintain solidarity.

Bilmes then moves on to an aspect of preference that is less often dealt with, and that is 'the relationship between preference and frequency counts' (Bilmes 1988:174-175). He is concerned about the fact that some conversation analysts focus on the frequency with which certain actions occur and that, in doing so, they may imply that frequency of occurrence can be used to identify preferred and dispreferred actions. The sort of implied claim that he is referring to occurs in Heritage and Watson

(1980:143), where they say that 'confirmations [of formulations] are massively preferred.' Bilmes (1988) argues that there are three things wrong with using frequency counts in connection with preference. The first is that the frequency counts try 'to account for what members do rather than for the inferences members draw' (*ibid.*:172); the second is that the count may simply be misleading if members are not free to perform the action that they would like to perform (*ibid.*:172-173); and the third is that conversation analysis is

a structural and not a statistical undertaking, and ... it is precisely this fact that makes CA methodologically significant for social science. The object is not to account for or to model what participants in particular situations normally do but to account for how what they do provides resources and constraints for other participants. The fact that members typically behave in certain ways is no doubt worth noting, but it should not be a central feature in the construction of [conversation analysis's] methodological concepts (*ibid.*:173).

The first and third objections can be dealt with by thinking of frequency as a very general indication of what the preferred response to a given action in certain circumstances might be, as Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) do. In discussing repair and the distinction between the preference for self-correction and the preference for other-correction, Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977:32) comment that

one sort of gross, prima-facie evidence bears both on the relevance of the distinction and on the preference relationship of its components. Even casual inspection of talk in interaction finds self-correction vastly more common than other-correction. In locating a strong empirical skewing, the relevance of the distinction is afforded some initial rough support.

Thus, actors recognise that there are general, context-free responses to different



actions, but that the context-sensitive responses may well be quite different (Coulter 1983:362-363). Furthermore, an actor's skill, or 'artfulness' as Garfinkel (1967) puts it, in responding to the indexical features of different contexts is a sign of his or her growing sophistication in the use of language.

Bilmes' second point is an unusual one and it is possibly based on an inappropriate anthropological analogy (Bilmes 1988:172-173). It also appears to be part of the reason why readers may find Bilmes (1988) difficult to follow. A discussion of this point, however, will be postponed until the next chapter, along with the consideration of the Bilmes' use of Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) lectures on preference, and it will be postponed for the same reason. The review of Sacks' lectures will provide a clear picture of preference, and, against this background, it will be possible to justify the claim that Bilmes' choice of lectures on preference and the analogies he uses are not illuminating ones.

In addition to refuting the claim that preference is a psychological notion, and the belief that preference can be identified by frequency of occurrence, Bilmes (1988:173-174) offers an interesting insight into the use of 'dispreference markers,' by which he means the delays, prefaces, accounts, and declination components that are familiar from Levinson (1983:332-336). Bilmes, however, uses the term 'reluctance markers' rather than 'dispreference markers,' and he explains that

reluctance markers are expressive of the speaker's reluctance to produce the response which follows. (It should be noted that this observation does not involve the analyst in psychological speculation. Actual reluctance on the part of a speaker is not being claimed, rather it is noted that the speaker has



produced expressions that conventionally indicate reluctance, just as "*ouch*" conventionally indicates pain.) To establish the separateness of reluctance and preference, we need merely show that preferred responses may be prefaced by reluctance markers without vitiating the preferred response.

None of Bilmes' (1988) criticisms of earlier work, however, appears to have influenced Cook (1989), Mey (1993), Nunan (1993), Tsui (1994), or Yule (1996), all of whom prefer either Levinson's (1983) account of preference organization or that of Taylor and Cameron (1987). They may well be unaware of Bilmes' work, but they have certainly had time to discover that Levinson's elegant, fifteen-year-old argument does not stand up to close inspection. However, Levinson's account is teachable, whereas Bilmes' is not. The complexity of Bilmes' account is responsible not only for perpetuating a partial and inaccurate description of preference, but also for possibly inhibiting discussion of the notion. Had Bilmes (1988:161) presented the 'clear and unitary concept of preference' that he had intended, preference might not still be a long way from assuming the central role in conversation analysis that Toolan (1989) suggests it should have.

Although the lack of clarity surrounding the notion of preference has inhibited research and discussion, it has not stopped it. Research based on an unsound model is hardly likely to produce impressive results and the final section of this chapter will illustrate this point. It will examine two recent articles in applied linguistics and language teaching which have appeared in international journals, and it will show that an unsound model produces unsound work.

### ***3.5 Unsuccessful applications of these interpretations***

Both Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1984a) have allowed their readers to make inaccurate inferences about the meaning of preference and these inaccuracies have not only been repeated in textbooks on pragmatics (Mey 1993; Yule 1996), and in research studies in pragmatics (Trosborg 1994), but they have also been accepted as reliable by researchers in ESL and in first language teaching. Furthermore, these flawed accounts of preference have been used as tools in the analysis of talk in educational settings. This thesis argues, however, that the partial accounts of Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), and Bilmes (1988) cannot be the basis of a coherent or useful analysis of conversational interaction or of talk in the classroom. Consequently, this section will discuss two articles which have attempted to apply the existing definitions of preference to spoken data, and it will show that, regardless of the other merits of the two articles, the application of the writer's understanding of preference contributes nothing of value to the interpretation of the data.

#### ***3.5.1 Taylor (1994)***

Taylor (1994) appeared in "The Australian Review of Applied Linguistics" and it is 'an attempt to apply conversation analysis to feedback sessions between a teacher studying on a postgraduate diploma course specialising in English as a second language (ESL) and a university supervisor who has just observed her lesson' (*Ibid.*:137). Like any supervisor, Taylor has had experience of sessions which she felt



had gone well and of sessions which she felt had not been successful. As she possessed tape-recorded examples of sessions of both kinds, she was in a position to listen to the tapes repeatedly, to transcribe sections of them, and to analyze the talk. Taylor believes that what distinguishes the sessions is the fact that 'there were frequent examples of preferred responses and of interactional alignment in the "better" session, whereas in ... the less satisfactory one, there were segments where dispreferred responses were far more frequent' (*Ibid.*). Taylor (1994) therefore attempts to show that there was a larger number of dispreferred responses in one session and that it was the production of these dispreferred responses that could explain why the lecturer felt that it was an unsuccessful session.

Taylor's understanding of preference is based on Heritage (1989), Levinson (1983), and Sacks (1987), and she describes preferred responses as being contiguous to the first pair part, short, and not usually accompanied by delays, markers or declination components (Taylor 1994:141). Thus, she regards the preferred response as the unmarked response. Similarly, her description of a dispreferred response shows it to be the marked response: it is not contiguous to the first pair part, and it is preceded by pauses and markers, and accompanied by explanations and justifications (*Ibid.*:142). Taylor (1994:143) analyses a discussion of a lesson taught by a student teacher called Paula (P) and observed by a supervisor called Sandy (S).

When Paula says that she cannot get a feeling of "energy" with these students, Sandy proffers a face-saving solution ("b'cz it's after work?"). Here it is notable that Sandy is building her questions initially to enable Paula to give a preferred response, in this case a yes/no answer, thus demonstrating a key characteristic of the preference in conversation for agreement. However, Paula produces a *dispreferred* response, "I think that's pardev et".



- 1 S: =b'cz it's after wo:rk?=  
 2 P: =mm| thi:nk. I- an- I:'m not sure,  
 3 S: m:m [>howda- HOW da- you<]  
 4 P: [I think that's pa:dev et.]

The dispreferred second is prefaced, in this order, with a receipt token "mm", a qualifier ("I think"), then two cut-offs and a further qualifier ("I'm not sure"). The "mm" (line 2) is not typical in that it is latched, but, based on some recent work on "mm" by Gardner (1993), the same-speaker talk that follows is disaligned both topically and interactionally. The second pair part is so far delayed that Sandy starts to take a turn at a point of possible completion (after "sure") and the dispreferred second is spoken entirely in overlap. In one sense we could say that the dispreferred second never actually gets spoken and that "I think that's pa:dev et" is yet another qualifier. In any case, it is done in an indirect manner.

The commentary above is an example of Levinson's (1983) legacy. It displays Taylor's readiness, throughout this work, to treat markedness as a template for identifying preference. She describes responses as 'preferred' if they are contiguous to the first pair part, and as 'dispreferred' if there is a delay in their delivery. In doing so, however, she ignores Jefferson's (1988) observation that there is a 'standard maximum' silence of approximately one second between exchanges in conversation, and that such silences are not necessarily noticeable, accountable, or sanctionable. Silences do not automatically signal a dispreferred response, as Bilmes (1995:388-389) explains

This generalization, that delay portends a "dispreferred" response, is contingent. A delay could be seen to be due to a mechanical problem in speaking (a stammer, something caught in the throat); to waiting for some sudden background noise to die down; to an incorrect hearing of what the speaker said or a failure to recognize that the speaker has relinquished the floor.

He might have added, as Jefferson (1988) does, that cognitive processing of prior utterances is another reason why silences of around one second occur, and that social

and cultural factors are also relevant. What conversation analysis does teach, however, is that transcripts of conversation should not be approached in this mechanistic manner, because a preconception of this sort can distort the analysis of the text.

In the data extract above, Taylor (1994) looks at the responses given by Paula to see whether they are marked or unmarked and she determines the preference accordingly. She announces that "Sandy is building her questions initially to enable Paula to give a preferred response" and, as a preferred response is one that either overlaps the prior utterance or is latched onto it (*ibid.*:141), she can see whether Paula's responses are unmarked and 'preferred', or marked and 'dispreferred'. Taylor announces that Paula's response on line two is dispreferred, and she reaches this conclusion partly because of the content of the response, which will be discussed below, and partly because of its form. She seems to think that if an answer does not express unqualified agreement, it cannot be a preferred response. Paula, however, appears to offer a token agreement of the sort that preface disagreements (Pomerantz 1984:70-77). She is unable to agree with Sandy's utterance, but she attempts to bridge the difference by finding truth in part of what Sandy says. Despite the presence of a token agreement and a display of willingness to see the other person's point of view, or to achieve a reciprocity of perspectives, Taylor describes the response as dispreferred, because it is not an immediate and unqualified agreement. Her interpretation, therefore, appears to be arrived at by comparing responses to a check-list of the features of marked and unmarked responses. Conversation analysts, however, prefer to examine the sequential development of the interaction and to draw inferences from



the understandings displayed by the actors. Such inferences are necessarily subject to revision in the light of later displays of understanding (Bilmes 1986), and this process is described very clearly in Heritage (1997).

More importantly, though, the check-list approach to conversation analysis resembles areas of discourse analysis where labels are assigned to utterances and where analyses are made in relative disregard of the context of the actions or of their sequential development. Taylor's analysis therefore reflects a second aspect of Levinson's legacy and that is in her assumption that there are known preferred and dispreferred responses to given actions. The familiar table showing the 'correlations of content and form in adjacency pair seconds' (Levinson 1983:336) has led Taylor to assign labels to her data and to predict the kind of response that Paula, the student teacher, should make. The table says, for example, that an assessment should be followed by an agreement, and that blame should be followed by denial. In accordance with such guidance, Taylor states that Sandy's advice should be followed by an agreement, but she also notes later, in passing, that it could be interpreted as a criticism of her student and therefore followed by a disagreement or denial (Taylor 1994:147).

Levinson (1983), Heritage (1989) and others have allowed their readers to infer that markedness is criterial in determining whether a response is preferred or dispreferred, and that the preferred and dispreferred responses to different actions can be learnt from a table. They have also encouraged researchers to assign the most convenient speech act label to utterances, instead of looking at the context of the interaction and

its sequential development in order to see what understandings the interactants display. Had Taylor dispensed with the unsound representations of preference in Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1989), she might have focused more clearly on the question of why she could describe the supervisor's utterances as advice for most of her paper, but then suggest that they might also be described as criticism.

Taylor has, in fact, identified an instance of the problem that Scollon and Scollon (1983:177-178) pointed to many years ago, and that concerns the nature of the speech exchange system within which the speakers understand that they are operating. Paula is not a young novice, but a mature, experienced teacher who is gaining an additional qualification, and Taylor (1994:140) notes that her relationship with her supervisor 'could tend more towards being a relationship of peers.' If Paula is allowed to understand that the talk with Sandy is talk among equals, then she is justified in making comments that she would not make if the talk were clearly labelled as being talk among unequals. Taylor's analysis of the data reflects the ambiguity in the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. If it is talk among equals, then the data can be interpreted in one way. If it is talk among unequals, it should be interpreted differently. Whichever it is, there should be evidence to indicate the nature of the speech exchange system as it is constituted from moment to moment (Schegloff 1991; Seedhouse 1994). Taylor, however, fails to address the problem and so her analysis of the data is unconvincing and her labelling of utterances as preferred and dispreferred is simply haphazard. The result is that the reader is forever noting that Taylor's analysis would be different if looked at from the perspective of the student.



The weakness of Taylor's analysis is a clear reflection of Levinson's influence. On the one hand, she identifies a response as preferred or dispreferred on the basis of whether it is marked or unmarked, but even her attributions of markedness are open to argument. And on the other hand, she assigns speech act labels to utterances and looks for the tabulated preferred or dispreferred responses despite not having determined the nature of the speech exchange system. Hence, Taylor does not so much analyze the data as search through it for examples that appear to correspond to those in Levinson (1983). This is a case of a researcher's being too faithful to the established literature on the subject of preference. The second article to be discussed, however, displays a very similar reading of the work on preference, but a total disregard for what it says.

### 3.5.2 *Greenleaf and Freedman (1993)*

The second article appeared in "Discourse Processes" and it describes and analyses a writing lesson in a ninth-grade English class in a school in the United States. The authors' aim is to build on existing knowledge of turn-taking in the classroom (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Mehan 1979), by drawing on research in conversation analysis in general and preference organization in particular. With the guidance of Bilmes (1988), Levinson (1983), and Sacks and Schegloff (Sacks 1987; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 1972a, 1972b; Schegloff and Sacks 1973), they intend to 'extend preference organization to the interactional structure of classroom discourse, taking student responses to instructional prompts as preferred or dispreferred rather than correct or incorrect in an absolute sense' (Greenleaf and Freedman 1993:472).

Given that preference organization has only been discussed in relation to everyday conversation, Greenleaf and Freedman's (1993) extension of this field to classroom talk is ambitious and original.

Making this extension requires adaptation to the particular context of the classroom, however. Whereas in ordinary conversation, both conversants presumably share the responsibility for structuring the conversation, in classrooms this responsibility falls mainly on the teacher. Students endeavour to participate in classroom discourse without necessarily being sure of what is customary or expected, without necessarily sharing knowledge in common with the teacher, and without necessarily being facile at interpreting the conversational moves of the teacher. In classrooms, then, since the teacher is ordinarily the most skilled interactant, he or she, rather than the student, will indicate the preference status of student responses ... We thus look for the types of responses teachers invite as they display orientations to particular preferred responses, and look for preferred and dispreferred forms of student responses in the ways that teachers treat the responses, rather than in the particular structural features of the responses themselves (*Ibid.*:472).

The operation of preference in conversation has to be learnt by children as they grow up, and by non-native speakers of English as they become increasingly familiar with the language. It is also learnt in the classroom, and Greenleaf and Freedman (1993) are proposing to show how preference organization is taught by teachers to their students. Although they discuss preference organization at some length, their criterion of a preferred or dispreferred response is an unusual one.

We examine whether the teacher marks each student response as preferred or dispreferred, looking at how he treats the response in his subsequent turn. In this lesson preferred responses are easily differentiated from their dispreferred counterparts in that they are used or taken up by the teacher, becoming resources in the lesson and helping to move it along (*Ibid.*:479).



Greenleaf and Freedman (1993) illustrate this process with transcribed extracts from a writing lesson for ninth-grade students. In the example below, the teacher is encouraging his students to add interesting detail to a text he has presented to them, and he is asking for examples of the kind of detail that could be included. Preferred responses are marked {PR} and dispreferred responses {DR}.

A few students offer suggestions for additions to the revision that Mr Peterson considers and appreciates but fails to use in the unfolding revision. From these dispreferred responses, we get a still narrower definition of what counts as a preferred response.

- T: ... Who else does she invite.  
S2: The secretary. {DR}  
T: [laughs] The secretary.  
... Even the sergeant of arms.  
[laughs]  
S: (unintelligible)  
T: Oh just make somebody up.  
We're working on this together now.  
S: (Members of the high school alumni association)  
T: Wh' wh' what?  
What?  
S: Members of the high school alumni association. {PR}  
T: Well no.  
A friend.  
... An old high school f' buddy.  
Right?  
S: Right. {Conversational feedback}  
T: Right [calls on someone]  
S: Buddy from high school. {DR}  
S: Chum. {DR}  
T: Chum [chuckles]  
... I want to still say friends ... [writes on board]  
S: (unintelligible offers)  
S6: Dentist. {PR}  
T: Okay.  
Who else does she invite?  
... What?  
S6 Her dentist.  
S: From San Rafael [laughs] {PR}  
T: [laughs] Okay.  
Okay.

Okay.  
And even,  
... that's good.  
And even her dentist from San Rafael.  
[writes on board]

(*Ibid.*:481-482)

According to Greenleaf and Freedman (1993:479), a preferred response is one that is taken up and used by the teacher. However, in the transcript above, the student's suggestion that they add 'members of the high school alumni association' is marked as preferred despite the fact that the teacher appears to reject it, and the proposal of 'the secretary' in the second turn seems to be appreciated by the teacher, but is marked as dispreferred. Greenleaf and Freedman (1993:485) explain this seeming inconsistency by saying that

a student, offering, "Members of her high school alumni association," receives, "Well no" from Mr Peterson (an "overt negative evaluation"). However, Mr Peterson goes on to revise this offer, which figures in the final revision of the paragraph.

Thus, although Mr Peterson rejected the suggestion when it was first offered, thereby making it a dispreferred response at the time of speaking, he incorporates the suggestion into the final version of the paragraph, thereby making it a preferred response at a later point. The transcript of the lesson, however, does not show that later incorporation happening nor whether it was noticed by the students.

Greenleaf and Freedman (*Ibid.*) offer further insight into their understanding of preference when they say that



It is interesting to note that responses receiving overt and covert negative evaluations ["the friends she invites are all presidents of the many Rick Springfield Fan clubs in the Bay Area" and "members of her high school alumni association"] and the one receiving the overt positive evaluation ["Her dentist. From San Rafael"] are taken up by Mr Peterson and figure in the solution of the writing problem he has identified; all of these are by definition preferred responses. In contrast, other responses that Mr Peterson evaluates positively ["the secretary" and "Buddy from high school. Chum"] are not taken up even though they are clearly appreciated by Mr Peterson; they are, therefore, dispreferred responses.

It seems then that the teacher can decide that an utterance is preferred either at the time it is spoken or at a later date, and that an utterance can be described as preferred regardless of whether the teacher accepts it or rejects it at the time of its utterance. In addition to the problems that this definition poses for the student, there is also the question of what basis the teacher is using for deciding that one response is good, but dispreferred ("the secretary"), another dispreferred but then later preferred ("members of the alumni association"), and a third preferred ("Her dentist. From San Rafael"). Students are clearly quick to learn what kind of people their teachers are and what types of answer appeal to them, but such insight is a response to preference in the ordinary sense of the word, not in the technical sense in which it is used in conversation analysis. It is certainly possible, however, for preference in the technical sense to be taught in the classroom. For example, imaginative answers might be preferred over predictable answers, or accuracy might be preferred over fluency. For these to be established as preferred in the technical sense, the preference organization would have to be displayed in the sequential development of the talk, and there would need to be evidence of the teacher's own personal preferences conflicting with the technical preferences that she had established in the classroom.

Mr Peterson's students no doubt operate with a well established system of preferred actions and responses, but Greenleaf and Freedman (1993) have not revealed it. Preference is concerned with actions that are performed and the responses that are appropriate or inappropriate. It is not concerned with pieces of information that a teacher might happen to like on one day, but dislike the next. The criterion for establishing the nature of preference needs to be less idiosyncratic than that proposed by Greenleaf and Freedman if preference is to be learnt and used. Their superimposing of preferred and dispreferred responses onto classroom talk is novel and it is preceded by a rationale that would be unfamiliar to many teachers of English as a first language. However, all that Greenleaf and Freedman have really demonstrated is that they have read Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), and Bilmes (1988), but that they have taken nothing more from that reading than the terminology of preference organization. Their understanding of preference, and that of Taylor (1994), is remote from the notion described and illustrated by Sacks (1992a, 1992b). Before considering how Sacks conceived that notion, however, a third example of an unsuccessful application of preference organization will be considered. This is a somewhat different example, because it is a misapplication of a primary source (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977) rather than of a secondary source.



### 3.5.3 Norrick (1991)

This third example of an unsuccessful application of preference is more surprising, because it is not so much a direct use of an unsound theory or a misunderstanding of existing writing on the subject of preference, but rather what seems to be the result of a careless reading of one of the best known works in the field of conversation analysis. The article in question, Norrick (1991), appeared in the *Journal of Pragmatics* and is entitled "On the organization of corrective exchanges in conversation." What is particularly interesting about Norrick (1991) is that the article claims to have found a flaw in Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks' ([1977] 1990) work on 'The preference for self-correction in the organization of repair in conversation,' and also a remedy for that flaw. This section will describe the alleged flaw and will explain that Norrick's remedy is superfluous. The basis of the explanation will be the fact that Norrick has made two errors in his account of preference.

Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks ([1977] 1990) argue that there is a preference for self-correction in interaction and that other-correction is dispreferred. An example of preferred, self-correction can be seen in the following data extract, in which A changes 'terra cotta' to 'terrazzo' without prompting or comment from any other speaker:

- A: That sto:re, has terra cotta floors. ((pause))  
A: Not terra cotta. Terrazzo.  
(*Ibid.*:48)

Other-correction, on the other hand, has been described as either 'embedded'

correction or 'exposed' correction (Levinson 1983:360), and the two forms can be seen in the data extracts below. In the first, the example of embedded other-correction, a customer (C) in a hardware store is talking to a salesman (S).

- C: Mm, the **whales** are wider apart than that.  
S: Okay, let me see if I can find one with wider **threads**.  
((looks through stock))  
S: How's this.  
C: Nope, the **threads** are even wider than that.  
(*ibid.*)

The salesman substitutes 'threads' for 'whales' without appearing to draw attention to the customer's mistake, and the latter accepts the correction and employs the appropriate term. The use of embedded correction can therefore mean, as Levinson (*ibid.*) says, that

'Correction' is being effectively achieved without ever becoming the sort of interactional issue that it can become if done through the normal three-position sequence of other-initiated self-repair.

- A: ... had to put new gaskets on the oil pan to stop-stop the leak, an' then I put- an then-  
R: That was a gas leak.  
A: It was an oil leak buddy.  
B: 'T's a *gas* leak.  
A: It's an oil leak.

((dispute continues for many turns))

The exposed other-correction, 'That was a gas leak,' is noticeable, accountable, and sanctionable, and it leads to interactional difficulties.

It is this account of dispreferred, other-correction that is the focus of Norrick's (1991)



attention. He claims that the system of preference described by Schegloff *et al.* ([1977] 1990) is inadequate, and he uses the data extract below to illustrate his claim. The extract comes from a conversation between two American colleagues. One of the two, Frank, has recently returned from England.

John:        Hey Frank. How far is Reading from London?  
Frank:        Reading. Oh:: not that far really.  
John:        Well: I was just looking at this map.  
(Norrick 1991: 62)

In his first turn, John mispronounces Reading, by using a long vowel instead of a short one, and Frank corrects his pronunciation. Norrick (*Ibid.*) points out that one actor's direct correction of another is an example of other-initiated other-correction, the most dispreferred form of correction, and argues that according to Schegloff *et al.* ([1977] 1990) such an action should be unwelcome to John. However, Norrick (1991:62) states that there is no evidence in the exchange to show that the other-initiated other-correction is dispreferred and that, in fact, the correction 'moves the interaction along more felicitously than a bare initiation which might lead to an extended repair sequence.' Norrick (*Ibid.*) cites other instances in which other-initiated other-correction is used and not treated as dispreferred. His conclusion is that 'it is difficult to see how the usual preference analysis might account for such examples,' and the discovery of this alleged weakness in Schegloff *et al.* ([1977] 1990) justifies Norrick's proposing that an alternative system is necessary.

What Norrick (1991) overlooks, however, is the fact that Schegloff *et al.* (*Ibid.*:41) anticipated such comments, and they did so because they are describing a system of

preference in which actors are capable of correcting themselves. Their system *assumes* that repair can be initiated 'by either self or other' (*ibid.*) and they acknowledge that there are many situations in which that is not possible. One obvious situation in which self-correction is not possible is when an actor lacks the knowledge necessary to do so, and one thing that most actors lack is a knowledge of how to pronounce foreign names. Thus, just as the American speaker in the example above mispronounced the name of a British town, so most Britons would have difficulty with American place names such as Des Moines, Poughkeepsie, or Decatur. It must be possible, therefore, for actors to correct themselves if one is to argue that there is a preference for self-correction over other-correction.

A more familiar example of the inability to self-correct, perhaps, is that of the EFL teacher, who is constantly dealing with unfamiliar foreign names and who can often only learn the correct pronunciation of a student's name from the student herself or perhaps from the students' compatriots. When a teacher mispronounces a student's name, the student may offer the teacher a correct pronunciation, and I had such an experience myself recently with a female student whom I had taught for two and a half semesters. Her name was Afeshah and I pronounced it *Afay*shah for over a year. Eventually she corrected the mispronunciation in the manner shown in the recollected exchange below.

\*Teacher: Afeshah, what do you think?  
Student: It's *Afee*shah. You always say "*Afay*shah".  
Teacher: I'm sorry. Why didn't you tell me before?



This is a somewhat unusual example, however, because mispronunciation for such a prolonged period of time is careless and unjustifiable, and clearly a dispreferred action. It is noticeable and accountable, and it is sanctioned by the student. The apology following the other-initiated other-correction is therefore appropriate. There are many other instances, however, where a teacher cannot help mispronouncing a name and where the action is noticeable and accountable, but not necessarily sanctionable. The determination of preference in such a case, as in all other cases, would depend on the indexical circumstances of the utterance.

Despite the warning issued by Schegloff *et al.* ([1977] 1990), Norrick (1991) finds examples of other-initiated other-correction in talk between parents and children, teachers and students, and native and non-native speakers, and very nearly half of the article is given over to these examples and to a discussion of other-correction in such contexts. Norrick (1991:78) notes that

common to all the situations in which a second speaker repeatedly took unmarked corrective actions was a perceived imbalance in background information and/or language ability toward the second speaker.

Norrick (1991:79) concludes that 'the foregoing discussion suggests a rather different picture of the organization of repair than the one [Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks] present.'

Norrick's (1991) failure to note that Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks ([1977] 1990) were describing a system in which actors were capable of self-correction makes his search

for a remedy superfluous, and it is the first of the two errors that he introduces into this discussion of preference. The second error is a closely related one, and it involves a failure on Norrick's part to recognise that the system of preference described by Schegloff *et al.* ([1977] 1990) is a 'context free' system, because they were trying to identify the most general mechanisms that operate in interaction. However, as with their equally important work on turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), they recognised that the system would inevitably be modified in its 'context sensitive' applications (*Ibid.* 699). Norrick (1991) seems to assume that the 'context free' form of the system of preference is an all-embracing description, and that if it does not fit all the occasions of its use it is flawed. This assumption derives perhaps from his reading of Levinson (1983).

Having considered Norrick's (1991) misreading of one important piece of work on preference, Taylor's (1994) and Greenleaf and Freedman's (1993) misunderstanding of the notion of preference, and the partial representations offered by Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), Taylor and Cameron (1987), and Bilmes (1988), it is now time to turn to the lectures of Harvey Sacks and to show how simple and clear the concept generally is when Sacks is discussing it. The only discussions that are anything other than extremely clear, it will be argued, are the two on which Bilmes (1988) based his article.



## Chapter Four

### 4. Preference Organization

The notion of preference derives from the work of Harvey Sacks, but his premature death meant that the meaning of preference and of certain other aspects of his work remained unclear until the publication of his collected lectures (Sacks 1992a, 1992b). Their publication has made it possible to understand what Sacks meant by preference, and to dispel the partial or misleading interpretations that have arisen in the twenty years since his death. This material could also make it possible to re-establish preference as a concept of central importance in conversation analysis. The lectures cover the period from the Fall semester of 1964 to the Spring semester of 1972 and they run to nearly sixteen hundred pages of text. As Sacks was the 'inventor' of conversation analysis (Sacks 1992b:549), the lectures show the development of his ideas over an eight-year period and inevitably involve a great deal of repetition and reformulation.

From the one hundred and sixty or so lectures that have been transcribed and included in the collection, this thesis will discuss preference as it is presented in just five lectures, and it will then provide a further four substantial illustrations which have been pieced together from a large number of lectures. The main discussion will establish clearly what Sacks meant by preference, and the illustrations will demonstrate that preference operates far beyond the narrow list of speech acts with

which the reader of Levinson (1983) is familiar. Far more lectures than the five mentioned could, of course, be discussed, but the notion of preference is essentially a simple one, although it is one that has been complicated and distorted over the years.

## **4.1 The work of Harvey Sacks**

### **4.1.1 "This is Mr Smith may I help you"**

The very first lecture in the collection begins in a most auspicious manner, because Sacks is confronted by a problem in his data and the solution to that problem involves a recognition that some actions are preferred and others are dispreferred. Sacks (1992a:3) presents his problematic data in the following manner:

I'll start off by giving some quotations.

- (1) A: Hello  
B: Hello
- (2) A: This is Mr Smith may I help you  
B: Yes, this is Mr Brown
- (3) A: This is Mr Smith may I help you  
B: I can't hear you.  
A: This is Mr Smith.  
B: Smith.

Sacks was studying recordings of telephone calls made to an emergency psychiatric hospital, and the authorities were concerned that the callers would sometimes not give



their names. Sacks set out to investigate this matter, and what particularly interested him was 'where in the course of a conversation could you tell that somebody would not give their name?' (*Ibid.*). Sacks studied the recordings and deduced the procedural rule that

a person who speaks first in a telephone conversation can choose their form of address, and in choosing their form of address they can thereby choose the form of address the other uses (*Ibid.*:4).

This deduction was possible because there is a normative requirement in society that when one person greets another, the second person should return the greeting. Heritage (1984a:115-117) explains that the returning of a greeting not only meets a standard expectation, but it also confirms or establishes that a certain relationship exists between the speakers, as the first speaker expected it would. The actions of the two speakers reflexively constitute or reconstitute the relationship between them. The returning of a greeting therefore constitutes a normal, unproblematic, expected relationship. However, this production of normatively correct behaviour requires 'that the actors have, and attribute to one another, a reflexive awareness of the normative accountability of their actions' (*Ibid.*:117). They behave as they do because they are aware that they are held accountable for the appropriacy of their behaviour, and this accountability serves as a powerful constraint on behaviour that is not normatively appropriate.

If the person who answers the telephone proffers a greeting and a name, that person can expect a greeting and a name in return. If one is missing or both are missing, the first speaker can hold the second speaker accountable for the noticeable absence.

Furthermore, it is not enough, in most circumstances, for a name to be offered in return for a name. In talk among equals, the same forms of name should be exchanged (Sacks 1992a:313). A person who offers a greeting plus a first name can expect a greeting and a first name, or a substitute for that name, in return. We can see, then, that reciprocity is required and if informality is responded to with formality, the second speaker is held accountable for that action. This required reciprocity may extend to quite small details, and, in accordance with the documentary method of interpretation, a first greeting or a return greeting may be compared to a typical greeting and found wanting in terms of warmth, duration, volume, sincerity, and so forth.

Sacks (1992a), in this lecture and in other lectures, does not make the trite observation that these things merely happen. Rather, his work describes for the first time how one speaker's actions constrain those of a second speaker. Thus, the typically brief Anglo-American greeting requires something equally brief in reply and a second speaker would be held accountable for a return greeting that was not typical. A long response might lead the first speaker to infer, for example, that the second speaker was joking or that she wanted to initiate a conversation. Conversely, in societies where prolonged and elaborate greetings are the norm, such as that of muslim Morocco (Davies 1987), the speaker who failed to reciprocate in manner and in kind would be held accountable for, among other things, her ignorance, unfriendliness, or rudeness.

In the first of Sacks' examples above, a brief greeting (A: Hello) receives the expected



brief greeting (B: Hello) in return. The first speaker's success in obtaining the appropriate response is an example of what Garfinkel (1967:44) calls a 'seen but unnoticed' achievement. The fact that concerted actions are achievements is something we do not notice until a failure to act in accordance with the norm occurs. It is that very failure that illuminates the existence of the norm and it is then noticeable that a person is not acting as she should.

In the second of Sacks' (1992a:3) examples above,

- (2) A: This is Mr Smith may I help you  
B: Yes, this is Mr Brown

the achievement of a successful exchange is equally unremarkable, but it is nevertheless more complex. The first speaker's proffering of a name and a question not only receives a name in return, but it also receives an answer placed contiguously to the question (Sacks 1987). This contiguous placing of a question and an answer is an example of how speakers collaborate in the successful production of a routine exchange.

The third of Sacks' (1992a:3) examples is

- (3) A: This is Mr Smith may I help you  
B: I can't hear you.  
A: This is Mr Smith.  
B: Smith.

Unlike the first two examples, this is a remarkable exchange, because the speaker's proffering of a name and a question does not receive an answer and a name in reply. Instead, the speaker claims to be temporarily unable to respond, and inability to respond, rather than reluctance to do so, is a form of behaviour for which others are generally not held accountable and for which they are therefore not sanctioned (Sacks 1992b:152; Levinson 1983:356-364). Although this inability to respond is not sanctionable, it is noticeable. The common sense knowledge of typical actions that is fundamental to the documentary method of interpretation (Garfinkel 1967:94-96) tells us that telephone lines which have been clear on innumerable past occasions of use will be clear on the next occasion. It also tells us, however, that when that line is being used for sensitive purposes, as in the case of calls to an emergency psychiatric hospital, it may occasionally be in the interest of callers to claim an inability to hear in order to disrupt the standard turn-taking procedure.

Thus, the significance of the third exchange is that it evidences a failure to provide what Sacks would eventually formulate as the 'preferred' response to an identification, which would be an identification that matched the one given by the first speaker, and which would be neither noticeable nor accountable. The caller in this third exchange, however, is held accountable for his use of a 'dispreferred' response and the first speaker, in the sensitive situation of an emergency psychiatric hospital, can infer that the request from *B* that he should repeat his name is a ploy that *B* is using in order to avoid giving his own name. With a less astute interlocutor, it might perhaps be a successful ploy, because the giving of a name is conditionally relevant after a first speaker has given a name, not after a first speaker has answered a question or



offered a clarification. What becomes conditionally relevant at that point is an acknowledgment of some sort, or another question, or some other action. By using his first turn to state that he cannot hear, the caller has subverted the conditional relevance of the need to supply a name, and has succeeded in moving the conversation on and away from a sensitive issue. It was Sacks' achievement to give a principled account of what the speakers were doing and to enable us to see that there are preferred and dispreferred responses to the most mundane actions.

#### 4.1.2 *"They're all like that, aren't they"*

Sacks was interested in the ways in which social actions are organized and this led him to notice and to analyze practices that are 'generally true' (Sacks 1992a:25). The type of observation he made is reported in the third lecture in the collection.

A woman was collecting research materials by going into parks with her children and just starting conversations with people. One of the things she reported was how the conversations began. And one recurrent way they began was, there would be a woman sitting on a bench. The woman would go over with her children, and sit down. The little boy would wander around for awhile, then he'd come up to her and she'd say, "Go away, I want to sit and rest." Sometimes he'd go away, but sometimes he'd sit there, annoyingly. And then the other woman would turn to her and say, "They're all like that, aren't they." And she'd say "Yeah" and they'd get into a conversation. I asked her, "Did you ever say no, or something like that?" And she'd say "Yeah when I first got out of college I was full of information. People would say that to me and I'd say 'Well I don't know, my kids aren't.' And they always stop talking right then and there (Sacks 1992a:25).

Although, at that point, Sacks did not formulate the type of organisation evident in this

example, he had in fact provided a typical illustration of one of the fundamental mechanisms of conversational interaction, namely the preference for agreement (Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987). The example above shows that the failure to agree with a friendly and innocuous observation from a stranger or a friend ("Nice day, isn't it?") is noticeable, accountable, and possibly sanctionable.

The literature on the preference for agreement demonstrates how second speakers make considerable efforts to agree with prior speakers, even when there are no very obvious grounds for agreement. There is an example of this orientation to the preference for agreement in the data extract below, which is taken from a recording of a programme broadcast on a local radio station in Britain. A male interviewer (A) is talking to an actress (B) about her latest role. In order to play the role, the actress has had to gain about two stone in weight.

[RS:TI:90:13:2]

- A: I would imagine er::: it certainly looks right it's just about ideal casting I would think isn't it=  
B: =Umm (.) yes it wasn't (.) er I was the right height but not the right weight so I put on two stone=  
A: =.hhhh really?

The interviewer suggests that the actress looks right for the part and, in so doing, he may be referring to her physical appearance or he may mean that the decision to cast her in the role looks like the right one. This exchange is complicated by the fact that although the actress has appeared in films and on television in Britain for over two decades and is therefore well known, the interview is taking place over the phone, and



she must consider the fact that the interviewer might not have seen her recently. Nevertheless, the actress's reply suggests that she understands his comment as referring to her physical appearance. Although she explains that her appearance could not have been such a significant factor in her being selected for the role, she begins her reply with a token agreement (Pomerantz 1984:72). Thus, despite the fact that she informs the interviewer of his mistake, she orients to the normative requirements of the preference for agreement by offering a token agreement before disagreeing. Furthermore, she finds grounds for minimizing her disagreement by acknowledging that only one aspect of her physical appearance needed to be changed.

Hence, not merely did Sacks identify the key mechanism of preference organization in his introductory lecture, but by this third lecture he had also drawn attention to one of its principal forms: the preference for agreement with assessments. Sack's 'genius' (Coulter 1995:327) is demonstrated by his ability to consider the innumerable instances of 'generally true' actions and to focus on those that have the greatest consequences for the construction of a sense of order in social life. As Coulter (1995:329) says

With uncanny precision, Sacks was able to discern the abstract in the concrete, the general in the particular and the analytically fascinating within the quotidian detail.

The 'generally true' actions that Sacks was interested in are suggestive of the 'context free' mechanisms that he was later to describe (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:699). As Sacks was *the* pioneer in the field of conversation analysis, he was

inevitably concerned to identify as broad a range of 'context free' mechanisms as possible in order to establish conversation analysis as a legitimate field of study. The importance of the 'context sensitive' applications of these mechanisms would, of course, be obvious to any ethnomethodologist, and Sacks' subtle analysis of conversational data demonstrates repeatedly what 'context sensitive' means.

Nevertheless, Sacks' necessary emphasis on the 'generally true' or the 'context free' has clearly led some researchers to assume that this is the primary focus of conversation analysis and has resulted in the largely unquestioned acceptance of Levinson's (1983:336) list of 'recurrent and reliable patterns' of preferred and dispreferred actions (Mey 1993; Yule 1996). Growing familiarity with Sacks' collected lectures will, however, result in the emergence of a more balanced understanding of his work.

Although the subject of normative accountability was central to Sacks' lectures and although there are numerous discussions and exemplifications of accountability, one neat and brief example occurs in the second lecture of the Spring semester of 1966. Here Sacks (1992a:261-262) says that

certain actions not only have regular places in some sequence where they get done, but may, if their means of being done is not found there, be said, by members, to not have occurred, to be absent. For example, the absence of a greeting may be noticed as the following data, from field observations, indicates. The scene involves two adult women, one the mother of two young children, ages six and ten. The kids enter, and the following scene ensues.

Lady:       Hi  
Boy:        Hi  
Lady:       Hi, Annie



Mother: Annie, didn't you hear someone say hello to you?  
Lady: Oh, that's okay, she smiled hello.  
Mother: You know you're supposed to greet someone, don't you?  
Annie: ((hangs head)) Hello.

In order for actors to be able to assert that some action is accountably absent, and not trivially absent, it is necessary to formulate a set of relevance rules which specify the actions that should occur and also when they should occur. The adjacency pair mechanism states that 'if a first member of a pair occurs, then the second ought to be done, and if it's not, that's noticeable' (Sacks 1992a:308). 'Noticeable absence' applies to first as well as second pair parts and it enables one actor to say, for example, of another that 'she saw me but she didn't wave', that 'she left without saying goodbye', or that 'she didn't say a word about it.' 'Noticeable,' therefore, is understood in the light of Garfinkel's (1967) observation that most mundane actions and utterances are 'seen but unnoticed.' While the analyst might be trained to listen to talk and to read transcripts and to ask, 'Why that now?', social actors do not routinely ask themselves this question. Instead, they ask it when they notice unexpected or irregular actions or utterances, just as the mother in the above example might have done when her daughter had failed to provide the expected response.

#### 4.1.3 "Everyone has to lie"

This is one of Sacks' (1992a:549-566) best known lectures, because a version of it was published in Blount and Sanches (1975). Sacks' interesting observation was that lying in the act of exchanging greetings and 'greeting substitutes' (Sacks 1992a:555)



is not generally accountable, or sanctionable, and often not even noticeable. In fact, telling lies in such a context is a largely unremarkable action. Sacks (1992a:559-560) explains the mechanism that actors employ when deciding whether to lie or to tell the truth when someone asks, "How are you?"

What the notion of 'lying' involved was that there were two steps, one of which I called 'monitoring', which consisted of finding the subset, and the second, which involved picking a term from that subset. What 'lying' involved was picking a term excluded by that monitoring operation. The monitoring operation gave you a subset and thereby gave you a set of available terms, and since the subsets are mutually exclusive, it also gave you a set of excluded terms. And you 'lied' when you picked an excluded term.

In response to a greeting, therefore, the social actor monitors her condition in order to determine how she feels. If the monitoring reveals a positive condition, she selects the positive subset and from it she takes a term such as 'Fine' or 'Great.' If, on the other hand, the monitoring reveals a negative condition, the actor turns to the negative subset and selects a term such as 'Terrible.' There is also a neutral subset which permits the use of responses such as 'O.K.' and 'All right.' However, even when monitoring reveals a negative condition, actors may choose terms from the positive subset, and, if they do so, they lie. Sacks (1992:562) remarks that

If you stand around, say, in a hospital, you'll perfectly well find people who look like they're just about to die - and may be just about to die - will be sitting, say, in a wheelchair in the hall or in the dayroom, their doctor comes up to them, says, "How are you?" and they say "Fine".

Actors not only monitor their own states before responding, but they also monitor the indexical circumstances of the question in order to determine whether they should

choose an answer from the positive subset or from the negative subset. A doctor is a person to whom a response from the negative subset may be given, but only if she belongs to the category of 'professionally interested physician' at the moment she asks the question. If she belongs to the category of 'physician hurrying to lunch' or to a meeting, the recipient of the greeting should choose a response from the positive category and lie (Sacks 1992a:562).

In a later elaboration of this analysis, Sacks (1975:73) explains that, in trying to determine what sort of response is appropriate to 'How are you?,'

the system of regulations involves not a potential asker's determination of whether he could handle any information but, instead, an answerer's determination of whether a given asker can receive the particular information or handle it now. That is, it is the business of one who is asked *How are you?* to determine whether the asker can handle that information, and to control his answer by reference to that determination. If such information as is not giveable to the asker obtains and occasions that the monitoring product is [negative], then the procedure for not getting into the diagnostic sequence is: Do not offer such an answer as generates the diagnostic sequence. Answer, e.g., *O.K.* or *Fine*.

Sacks does not use the term preference either in this lecture or in the later paper (Sacks 1975), but the reader can see that the system he refers to above determines the use of preferred and dispreferred responses, and that his analysis describes the occasioned nature of the system. Thus, the production of a preferred response requires careful monitoring on the part of the actor who receives the greeting or the 'greeting substitute' (Sacks 1992a:555), because she recognises that she will be held accountable for the consequences of her action. A preferred response is not



accountable or sanctionable, but a dispreferred response, depending on its nature, may be sanctioned. One can imagine, for example, a sick person in a wheelchair who might give a positive response to a doctor's greeting if she calculates that it is the appropriate thing to say at that moment. However, people frequently miscalculate the indexical particulars of such questions and they give deliberately 'dishonest' responses to genuine enquiries. If the lie is later revealed, the actor will be seen to have given a dispreferred response to doctors, family members, or friends, and her behaviour may be sanctioned.

This is the kind of action which gives rise to justifiable annoyance and to questions such as, 'Why didn't you tell me?' For various reasons, some actors find it hard to explain their most pressing problems to those whom they affect most directly, such as family members, and they confide instead in strangers. An example of this happening comes from a recording of a phone-in programme on Malaysian radio. A male caller (B) is telling the male presenter (A) what causes him the most stress.

[MR:PI:96:N24:1]

- A: The main cause of stress in your life is=  
B: =Ah::: I'm afraid it's my better half  
A: (0.5) Your wife?=  
B: ((laughs)) No er::: yu yu you see it's more like er er (.) a very confused and and very persistent but ah ah at a same time you know er::: you just can't live without her  
A: Ah hah but why do you say she is the main cause of stress in your life=  
B: =Ah::: (.) the thing is ah::: (.) while we have to be out er er (.) trying to to (.) er fill the::: the::: er (.) our (.) food table eh?=  
A: =Ah hah=  
B: =Ah::: and they expect us to be::: (0.5) to be (.) you see I have to entertain cli:::ents and er things like this=  
A: =Mm hmm=  
B: =An ah::: (.) the other half expects me to also entertain her (.) like er



when she say oh look I'm very lonely you know (.) why don't you (.) er:::  
come back (then) sometimes and take me off for lunch which is not very  
possible ...

It is possible, of course, that *B* simply has an inconsiderate wife who does think about the other demands on his time, but, given the familiarity of the situation, it is more likely that he too often 'lies' in response to her questions about the amount of work he has to do, and that at some point in the future she will ask him, 'Why didn't you tell me?'

The routine nature and acceptability of this practice of lying in response to questions about how we are, or its 'seen but unnoticed' character, was revealed by Garfinkel (1967) in one of his breaching experiments. The purpose of these experiments was to breach standard expectations in order to show that routine behaviour is an achievement (Schegloff 1986), and in order to reveal the 'ethno' methods that contribute to that achievement. In this particular case, Garfinkel instructed his experimenters to seek clarification of any utterance addressed to them. In effect, this involved, in part, their monitoring their own states when receiving, for example, a greeting or a greeting substitute, but suspending the practice of monitoring the sort of information that the first speaker was eligible to receive, as in the following example:

The victim waved his hand cheerily.

(S) How are you?

(E) How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my ...?

(S) (Red in the face and suddenly out of control.) Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are.

(Garfinkel 1967:44)

We can see that the experimenter's (E) deviant response has flouted the system of preference that organises the way that greetings are made and responded to. The example illustrates very clearly that when we talk about a preferred response, the term 'preference' does not refer to a person's psychological disposition at a particular moment in time. The sick person would almost certainly prefer, in the ordinary sense of the term, to tell someone that she is in pain, that she is afraid, or that she is lonely, but she monitors the circumstances of the "How are you?" very carefully in order to determine the preferred and dispreferred responses. The preferred response with a concerned physician or with a sympathetic nurse might well be to unburden herself and to speak honestly, but with a tired doctor or nurse at the end of a long shift it might well be to lie, and the responses of the doctor or the nurse will suggest whether her decision was the correct one. The preferred response, therefore, is not necessarily predictable and it depends on the actor's understanding of the indexical details of the question and on her own judgment. Sacks' discussion is therefore a highly effective answer to those such as Taylor and Cameron (1987:114) who hanker after a 'psychological or functional' basis for preference.

Sacks' discussion of "Everyone has to lie" provides a prototypical example of preference at work. The question, "How are you?" is one that almost every actor encounters on a daily basis and it is one that obliges us to determine, in each case, what the preferred response is. We cannot safely construct a table of actions and preferred and dispreferred responses, as Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1984a) do, and suggest to a non-native speaker that "Fine" or "Great" is a safe, unmarked, and preferred response, because such a strategy might result in that person's ultimately



having acquaintances rather than friends. Furthermore, although this example is prototypical, it is also complex and unusual, because while we may imitate Garfinkel's experimenter and provide a 'truthful' form of dispreferred response, the 'lying' response can also be a dispreferred response. However, it is one that may not immediately be recognized as dispreferred, and it is one that may lead to serious recriminations of the sort, "Why didn't you tell me that you were in trouble?" or "Why didn't you tell me you needed money?"

In deciding how to respond, therefore, an actor has to try to recognize what an action is designed to achieve. Is the doctor's "How are you?" a reflex action, a mere recognition of her presence, an expression of interest that cannot be satisfied at that moment, a request for information, or something else? The documentary method of interpretation allows the actor to draw upon substantial resources in order to determine what would be a preferred response in a given context. However, what the actor decides is the preferred response in the technical sense of the word may not be the response that she would prefer to give in the ordinary sense of the word, and so, as Sacks says, she *has* to lie.

#### *4.1.4 A 'defensively designed' story*

One of the clearest expressions of what Sacks meant by preference occurs in a lecture that he gave in the Fall semester of 1971, because in that lecture he distinguishes between the everyday use of the term 'preferred' and its technical use in conversation analysis. The lecture is entitled "A 'defensively designed' story" and

in the story a young woman defends herself against possible negative inferences by explaining that she behaved in a dispreferred manner only after trying and failing to act in a preferred manner. Thus, she argues that her behaviour was not the result of a disregard for the preferred choice, but rather an inability to comply with it. Sacks' discussion of the young woman's behaviour centres on the following data extract:

- Louise: One night- (1.0) I was with this guy that I liked a real lot. An uh (3.0) we had come back from the show, we had gone to the (1.0) Ash Grove for a while, 'n we were gonna park. An I can't stand a car. 'n he // has a small car.
- Ken: Mm hm,
- Louise: So we walked to the back, an' we just wen' into the back house an' we stayed there half the night. (1.0) We didn't go to bed to-t'each other, but- it was so comfortable an' so // nice.
- Ken: Mm hm,
- Ken: Mh
- Louise: Y'know? There's everything perfect.  
(Sacks 1992b:453)

Sacks (1992b:456) points out that this story is told by one unmarried teenager to another. As the two are also members of the same therapy group, they might appear to have a great deal in common. Sacks (1992b:453-454) argues, however, that because the story is told by a teenaged girl to a teenaged boy, and because of certain other facts, it is defensive in design and it is defensive for the following reasons:

By virtue of that he is male, a way that he has, that she can know of, of reading the story that she tells, is in terms of it possibly telling him the terms of her availability; a thing that he could be interested in on his own, or, insofar as he has male acquaintances, then the terms of her availability can be used by him to advertise her (*Ibid.*)

The fact that Louise tells Ken the story could make her vulnerable to undesirable



thoughts or actions. This leads her to produce certain defensively designed elements, such as her formulation of the man she was with as 'this guy I liked a real lot,' which, according to Sacks (1992b:453), informs the hearer that she is definitely not available to just anyone. Another defensive element is the information that she went back to the house only after considering the idea of parking, and then rejecting it on the grounds of comfort and practicality. Along with countless other American teenagers of her time, parking would have been the normal, unmarked activity in a way that it would not have been for a married couple or, say, for a forty-year-old unmarried couple. As Sacks (1992b:455) explains

Such a story as, "One night I went out with a guy I liked a lot and we went to the movies and after the movie we parked and eventually we went home" is no story for such as they. Though it perfectly well might be a story if she was 12 years old, or if she was considerably older than she is, in which case it might be 'doing something like unmarried teenagers.' After all, for a married couple or unmarried adults or varieties of other combinations, this same positioning would not be specifically 'normal.' The sex only has its normal positioning vis-a-vis that they are unmarried teenagers.

The fact, however, that parking was an unmarked activity does not mean that it was an uncomplicated activity, because, as Erica Jong (1995:141) explains, the lives of teenaged couples in the nineteen-fifties were very carefully calculated.

... and did we have rules in 1955! Outside or inside the bra, outside or inside the panties, inside or outside the jockey shorts. If rhymed poetry is tennis *with* a net (to paraphrase Robert Frost), then "making out" in 1955 was a tournament with its own elaborate rules. One false move and you could be *out*.

It is important for Louise, therefore, to make it clear to her fellow teenager that she is

a normal, unmarried teenager for whom

parking is *preferred*. I don't mean it's favourite, but there's some way it's preferred over the back house, if at least only in moral terms. That is to say, she brings off that *she* prefers the back house, but there is a more abstract sense of 'prefer' which involves her in invoking the parking - that which is 'preferred' in the more abstract sense - as a first alternative (Sacks 1992b:456).

The back house is clearly preferred to the car in the sense that Louise finds it more comfortable and would sooner be there, but parking is 'preferred' in the technical sense as something that unmarried teenagers would normally do without having to account for their behaviour, and without attracting comment or censure from their peers. As Louise wishes to be viewed as a normal teenaged girl and not as one who, in the 1960s, might have been described as 'loose' or 'easy,' she pointedly inserts the information that her 'preference' was to park, but that her boyfriend's car was too small for comfort. It has already been noted that inability to perform a preferred action is an acceptable account and one that is not sanctioned (Levinson 1983:357-364 ). Having made the dispreferred choice of returning to the house rather than parking, she seeks to pre-empt any suggestion of further dispreferred choices by stating that they spent only half the night in the house and that they did not go to bed. As Sacks (1992b:457) observes

Presumably what she *didn't* do is something that she figures she needs to say, by virtue of the question now arising: "Okay, if she would do that, what else would she do? So that in proposing that she did something she knows is unusual - and she knows it's unusual by virtue of her commitment to the normal preferences - she then engages in bounding it as to what she didn't do.



Louise has described how she performed a dispreferred action and, for Ken, the action was noticeable, accountable, and possibly sanctionable. Knowing this, Louise designs her account to forestall the negative inferences and unwelcome actions that might otherwise be part of the sanction. An important part of that account involves acknowledging the existence of preferred and dispreferred actions, and claiming that she would have performed the preferred action if it had been possible. In doing this, she tries to suggest that her performance of a dispreferred action was an exceptional departure from the norm, rather than one example of a possibly interesting and exploitable collection of departures.

#### *4.1.5 Displaying understanding*

The first four discussions of Sacks' presentation of preference have shown that the action of a first speaker can constrain the actions of a second speaker by indicating that a response of one type is preferred and that a response of a different type is dispreferred. The discussion of the possible responses to "How are you?" shows, furthermore, that such responses are not as automatic or invariant as they might seem, and that in order to determine which type of response is preferred and which is dispreferred, actors examine the indexical circumstances of the first utterance. Then, having made their decision and responded, they examine the first speaker's subsequent utterances in order to see what understandings that person displays of their response. This examination of the displayed understandings enables both parties to reflexively reconstitute the exchange in whichever way they wish.

If the second speaker provides a dispreferred response, this will generally be noticed by the first speaker who will then hold the second speaker accountable for it. The fact that the second speaker has proffered a dispreferred response may result in the first speaker's making certain inferences about the second speaker's knowledge, manners, disposition, tiredness, ability, health, friendliness, and so forth. It is precisely in order to avoid uncomplimentary inferences being drawn that most actors make some effort to acknowledge the existence of a preferred response, particularly when it is not possible for them to give it. This is an important thing to do, because Sacks (1992b:53) notes that negative inferences can result in unattractive characterisations of actors, and that such characterisations can be extended to include the actor's family, neighbourhood, region, nation, race, or any other group to which she belongs.

In many areas of social activity, however, preference organisation is less tightly constraining than it is in the case of greetings, and Sacks returns repeatedly to an example of preference in which the dispreferred response is noticeable and perhaps accountable, but not necessarily sanctionable. This is the preference for displaying understanding by telling what Sacks calls 'second stories', and it is one of the many little known, though not insignificant, examples of preference that has not been referred to by Cook (1989), Coulthard (1985), Mey (1993), Nunan (1993), Yule (1996), or anyone other than Sacks (1992a, 1992b). The reason why this example of preference remains obscure is that it cannot be identified by the markedness test, it does not fit comfortably into a table of preferred and dispreferred responses, and it is not sufficiently formulaic to allow the easy noticing of its frequency. Nevertheless, as data collected for this thesis will show, competent social actors have no difficulty in



recognising the preferred and dispreferred responses. Sacks (1992a:706-707) illustrates the preference for displaying understanding by telling 'second stories' in the following manner:

If you mention a person and say something happened to them, e.g. in the 'news' format, "My aunt had an operation" or something of that order, then one systematic way that conversation can proceed involves preserving the thing that happened, and some next speaker offering that it happened to another standing in such a relationship to them as the one you just mentioned. Or if you say, e.g., "My mother said the following this morning" then you'll find that people will say "My brother said something like that" (Sacks 1992a:706-707).

Sacks does not discuss preference in relation to the telling of second stories, but given that the telling of a first story can be designed to invoke a reciprocity of perspectives (Schutz 1962), and to foster intersubjective understanding, it is clear that the telling of a second story would be a preferred response, because it would contribute to the achievement of those ends. There is an illustration of this process in a later lecture, in which Sacks (1992a:764-765) discusses the transcript of a telephone conversation between two women. The first woman describes a car accident, the wreckage of which she had seen some days before the conversation. The news of the accident, however, has not appeared on television or in the newspapers. The second woman then refers to an accident that she has knowledge of, but which has also gone unreported. This reciprocation is similar to Sacks' (1992a:25) description of the young mother in the park with her child. When that young woman displayed understanding and acceptance of another woman's experience, and then contributed something from her own experience, the conversation progressed uneventfully. When she failed to display intersubjective understanding by not acknowledging the truth of what the other had

said and by not reciprocating, the conversation did not progress.

As further evidence of the preference for the understanding of confidences or personal experiences to be displayed and reciprocated, Sacks (1992a:771) reports that some patients at the suicide prevention centre where he worked did not want to discuss their experiences with psychiatrists, because psychiatrists are professionally trained to listen and analyze and *not* to reciprocate. The patients, however, wanted to talk to someone who had had similar experiences. They wanted to share their experiences with someone who would reciprocate and who would collaborate in the construction of satisfying and meaningful talk.

While the determining of both the preferred and the dispreferred responses to the telling of a story or the offering of an experience depends on the indexical circumstances of the talk, Sacks (1992a:706-707) suggests that a display of intersubjective understanding would generally count as a preferred response. Actors need to know that their words are understood and that their experiences are recognised and appreciated. While back-channel responses and longer expressions of agreement and recognition contribute to the development of intersubjective understanding (McCarthy 1991:127; Fais 1994), the telling of a complementary second story establishes beyond reasonable doubt that the first story has been listened to and understood. An example of this process in action comes from a local radio station in the United Kingdom. In the data extract below, (A) is a male talk show host and (B) is a female caller, and they are discussing the subject of how much force the occupant of a house or flat can use against a would-be burglar.



[TR:PI:96:33:2]

1 B: So you've got to be careful (.) about ah:::m (.) what you put around your  
2 property  
3 A: Yeh=  
4 B: =So that ih if a trespasser comes in=  
5 A: =Yeh=  
6 B: =You owe them the same duty of care as you would a an invited visitor=  
7 A: =Unbelievable innit?=  
8 B: =Yeh=  
9 A: =[What a stu:::pid] what a stu:::pid law] What a stu::pid law=  
10 B: =[ ( )] [Absolutely]  
11 B: =Well if you look up some of these cases=  
12 A: =Yeh=  
13 B: =They'd really make you laugh=  
14 A: =Really?=  
15 B: =Yeh I can't remember them offhand=  
16 A: =All right=  
17 B: =No but er:::m (.) like trespassers taking owners (.) to court (.) for  
18 damages  
19 A: Yeh  
20 B: Rather than the other way round=  
21 A: =Yeh=  
22 B: =and the law seems to favour (0.5)  
23 A: The burglars=  
24 B: =Yeh=  
25 A: =[Stupid innit?]=  
26 B: =[ ( ) property]=  
27 A: =I know I know I remember a case where a friend of mine ah::: (1.0)  
28 was ah::: (.) woke up was woken up at three o'clock in the morning went  
29 downstairs and there were two blokes downstairs (.)  
30 B: Mmmm=  
31 A: =burglaring is ouse=  
32 B: =Mmm  
33 A: took out a baseball bat whacked one of them (.)  
34 B: Yep=  
35 A: =the other one did a runner=  
36 B: =Yep=  
37 A: =He got nicked (0.5) my mate got nicked=  
38 B: =I can believe it=  
39 A: =For hitting a burglar=  
40 B: =Yeh=  
41 A: =Outra::geous=  
42 B: =Yeh=  
43 A: =What a stupid pathetic law=  
44 B: =Totally

The talk show presenter (A) does not merely express understanding of B's complaint, but he demonstrates it by telling the story of his friend and the burglars. This intersubjective understanding is further illustrated by A's ability, as shown on line 23, to complete B's utterance (Sacks 1992a:144-168; Fais 1994).

The telling of a 'second story' is one of the many ways of displaying intersubjective understanding and this is a preferred activity. Actors do not, of course, complain when their friends and relatives take an interest in what they say, because it is the dispreferred action, *not* displaying intersubjective interest or understanding, that is the subject of complaints such as, 'He never shows much interest in my work.' In many cases, it is not enough merely to be physically present, at the breakfast table for example, when another person is talking about things that are of interest to her. Individuals need to communicate and to know that the other is attempting to understand and reciprocate, and actors can be sanctioned for not attending to what is being said, as in the following extract from a discussion of child rearing practices.

[CR:PI:97:54:1]

- B: ... because we parents have a very hard time=  
A: =Yes=  
B: =whether quietly diplomatically or how we have to use it=  
A: =Norma [Norma Norma]  
B: [to ( )] our children=  
A: =Norma (0.5) I agree::: with you Norma  
B: (1.5) Well let me hear your point of agreement=  
A: =Well act=  
B: =because from what I listened=  
A: =Yes yes=  
B: =earlier on=  
A: =Yeh=  
B: =you were you were on the wrong side=  
A: =Well you you see you're you're right but ...



The data extract above is taken from a recording of a phone-in programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. *B* is a female caller who appears to suspect that the male programme presenter (*A*) is giving her only token responses, perhaps so that he can move on to the next caller, and that those responses are not truthful. She shows, as all actors know, that 'Yes' does not necessarily signal agreement or intersubjective understanding, and she treats *A*'s response as dispreferred. The subtlety and indexical nature of this exchange is one further illustration of how misleading the compiling of a table of actions and of their preferred and dispreferred responses can be (Greenleaf and Freedman 1993:470; Heritage 1984a:269; Levinson 1983:336)

The problem with such tables is that they help to implant in the student's mind the idea that there are not only predetermined preferred and dispreferred responses to given actions, but that these responses are opposites: agreeing or disagreeing, accepting or rejecting, and denying or admitting. This thesis argues instead that, in attempting to make sense of given actions and utterances, actors employ the 'ethno' methods of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives. The subtle nature of this process can be seen in the data extract below, in which an elderly woman (*A*) relates a deeply-felt and long-remembered personal experience to a much younger woman broadcaster (*B*) on a phone-in programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. The overhearing audience and the analyst can readily empathize with the caller, but the broadcaster fails to demonstrate that she understands the point that the caller is making. What is particularly interesting about this exchange is that despite the number of covert

appeals for understanding that the caller makes, she does not overtly indicate that the broadcaster's response is dispreferred.

[RS:PI:95:37:1]

- 1 B: I'm talking about this wedding business erm (.) my niece I know it's years  
2 ago now (.) but erm (.) she I mean she was a grandmother twice three  
3 times over but erm (.) she got married (.) all in white (.) she had all the  
4 trimmings and everything (.) she was five months pregnant=  
5 A: =Mm hmm=  
6 B: =And she you know she went down the aisle as if nothing (.) you know  
7 (.) as well we was stunned (.) because I mean my husband and I (.) I  
8 mean we lived in the same house=  
9 A: =Mmm=  
10 B: =We lived downstairs they lived upstairs=  
11 A: =Mm hmm=  
12 B: =And we didn't even know that she was pregnant=  
13 A: =Really=  
14 B: =No (.) we didn't know a thing=  
15 A: =Are you saying that you're are you saying that that's wrong that she  
16 went down the aisle five months pregnant in white is that wrong is that  
17 what you're saying=  
18 B: =We:::ll I was gonna say it was (.) bit of a shock re::ally I mean to find  
19 out I mean everybody else knew that w you know and we was praising  
20 her up you know and everything (.) cos we say you know oh doesn't she  
21 look lovely you know and (.) and (.) and it wasn't until the Christmas time  
22 that w we found out that well (.) yeh (.) what was it er the thirtieth of er  
23 December she er (.) delivered the baby=  
24 A: =Mmm well I'd say she was a very brave girl really (.) to to to you know  
25 she must have known that people would be gossiping about her (.) she  
26 was very brave to go down there and make that sort of commitment don't  
27 you ( ) Beatrice=  
28 B: =Oh yes definitely (.) but er the person was saying (.) that er (.) people  
29 don't do that but I know damn well they do ((laughs))=  
30 A: =Mmm people do that do you agree with it do you condone it Beatrice  
31 or not=  
32 B: =Oh no no I mean=  
33 A: =Why not=  
34 B: =No she's been a marvellous mother and (.) know a grandmother now  
35 but (.) erm oh::: but the thing was it was just the shock (.) the finding out  
36 you know=  
37 A: =Well Beatrice thank you very much for your call this morning



In this exchange, *B* describes an event that occurred many years earlier and the feelings that she and her husband experienced. On line 7 she says that they were 'stunned' by the news, not just because they were unaware of their niece's condition, but because they had lived in close proximity to her and yet had been excluded from discussion of a family event about which they were ultimately bound to learn. *B* makes further reference to the issue of ignorance on lines 12 and 14. However, despite *B*'s clear and repeated references to the matter of exclusion, *A* formulates the gist of *B*'s talk as a question of morality (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Heritage and Watson 1980). Not only is *A*'s formulation inaccurate, but it is also rather late in coming. There are a number of pauses in *B*'s second turn and these are transition relevance places (Levinson 1983:297) at which *A* might have expressed understanding or surprise. One such place is the end of *B*'s second turn, which is where her revelation is effectively complete. Her third turn elaborates slightly on her second, and her fourth turn is a repetition of the information in her first and second turns. However, it is only after *B*'s emphatic repetition on line 12 of her ignorance of the news of her niece's pregnancy that *A* responds with an *Oh-receipt*, 'Really' (Heritage 1984b), but this proves to be a prelude to an expression of misunderstanding.

*A*'s formulation, on lines 15-17, of *B*'s talk represents a failure of intersubjective understanding and a failure to achieve a reciprocity of perspectives. To achieve intersubjective understanding, actors need to draw on a shared stock of common knowledge. This stock of knowledge consists of typical actions performed under typical circumstances by typical actors (Heritage 1984a:55-56). One such item in this itinerary would be the knowledge that when an individual is deliberately and persistently denied

access to important information by close friends, close relatives, or colleagues, that person ultimately experiences surprise, anger, embarrassment, indignation, and a range of other emotions.

Hence, in the talk transcribed above, *B* (the caller) could reasonably expect that *A* (the presenter) would be willing and able to adopt the perspective of an individual (*B*) who had experienced shock and other emotions in a typical situation, and that *A* would respond accordingly. However, in view of *A*'s failure to demonstrate a reciprocity of perspectives, it would be understandable if *B* had formulated the gist of her own talk and had pointed out that *A* simply was not following what she was saying. Instead of doing this, *B* merely produces an elongated and emphatic preface to a disagreement, 'We:::ll' (Pomerantz 1984:72). This signal of impending disagreement is an opportunity for *A* to forestall that disagreement by proffering an alternative formulation (Pomerantz 1984:76), but the opportunity is not taken. In the absence of any concession on *A*'s part, *B* withholds her disagreement and merely restates the feelings that she has already expressed. In her final turn in this exchange, *B* introduces two disagreement components, 'but' (Pomerantz 1984:72), and a number of pauses and hesitation markers, but *A* does not respond to them. *B* then reiterates the point that she has been making throughout, but receives no acknowledgment of its significance from the presenter.

By not challenging the presenter's formulation of her talk, *B* ensures that the talk ends amicably, though without an admission from the broadcaster that actors are right to be shocked and offended when their close relatives or friends deliberately hide



important information from them. As most adults have experience of such exclusion and are routinely concerned about whatever affects themselves and others at home or at work, some reciprocation from the broadcaster might have been expected. An admission such as, "I can sympathize with you" or "I know exactly what you mean", would have been an unremarkable response requiring no explanation or account. The broadcaster's failure to recognize the caller's concern, on the other hand, is noticeable and accountable, though not necessarily sanctionable.

The caller, however, is likely to have experienced some frustration and disappointment at the broadcaster's failure to understand and at her dispreferred response, and Moerman (1988) describes a similar experience, albeit among Thai peasants. He presents the transcript of a talk between a group of peasants and a government official and points out that however often the latter misunderstands the former, the peasants refrain from offering an accurate formulation of the gist of their own talk. Moerman (1988:45) adds, 'My own sympathies are all with the peasants who could not shout, 'What d'ya mean, 'Which Phian'? We've been tellin' ya about him over and over again!'

The interpretation presented above is open to challenge, because the talk is extracted from a phone-in programme on a local radio station and it is part of a discussion that was spread over more than an hour. Although it was selected because it appeared to illustrate a dispreferred response to a caller's covert request for reciprocal understanding, in the absence of the transcript of the preceding talk it might be argued that the presenter's response was not dispreferred in the broader context of the programme. It might be suggested that the caller's actions were themselves

dispreferred in some way, by, for example, not attending closely enough to preceding utterances or by disagreeing with the programme presenter. To attempt a confirmation of the above claim that the presenter's response was dispreferred might therefore require the evidence of the entire transcript.

It is in exchanges such as those described above that Levinson's (1983) discussion of preference is of little help. Markedness does not provide an answer to the question of how the analyst determines the preferred and dispreferred responses to an action, the tables of preferred and dispreferred responses offer no reliable guidance, and frequency of occurrence is of no more than incidental interest. Instead, the analyst looks at the sequential unfolding of the interaction and notices, in the above example, that the caller's story was designed to achieve, at worst, a recognition of its significance, and, at best, some form of reciprocation. The analyst sees, however, that the caller failed to achieve her minimum objective and that, for the reasons given above, the broadcaster's response was a dispreferred one.

The first five sections of this chapter have discussed preference as it is presented or as it appears in some key lectures. The remainder of the chapter will provide four examples of preference which have been compiled from discussions of varying length in a number of Sacks' lectures, and it will end with a discussion of the uncharacteristically difficult lectures upon which Bilmes (1988) based his work, and with a summary of the concept of preference.



#### *4.2.1 The preference for noticing*

Harvey Sacks' work was cut short by his premature death, and his lectures were edited and published nearly twenty years later by his friends and colleagues. It is inevitable, therefore, that while the lectures contain many themes and ideas that are well developed and carefully articulated, as in the case of the five lectures discussed above, there are also many other interesting ideas which Sacks was only in the process of developing and which appear in different versions in different semesters. The remainder of this chapter will present four of those ideas and it will begin with 'the preference for noticing.' Sacks (1992a, 1992b) did not give such a title to his observation, but this thesis hopes to show that he might in time have done so, because the behaviour he describes does enhance our understanding of preference organization. Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) observations about 'noticing' are interesting also because his perspective contrasts with that of others who write about 'noticing.'

When 'noticing' is referred to in the literature of conversation analysis, it tends to be concerned with 'noticing' as a means of interrupting a conversation or of moving the talk from one topic to another (Bergmann 1990). Thus, someone entering the field of vision of the speakers can be grounds for interruption and for a change of topic, as can the hearing of a sudden noise, or the occurrence of some other action. This routine response to the noticing of persons or things can be seen in the data extract below, which is taken from a recording of a conversation in a British family. *A* is the husband, *B* is the wife, and *C* is a male relative. *A* and *B* are telling *C* about the problem an acquaintance has had with his larynx and, as the conversation pauses, *C*

looks out of the window and notices the arrival of a workman. This noticing prompts him to mention the man's arrival and it results in a change of topic.

[FF:C:96:61:2]

- B: The poor man's had a laryngoscopy and it a sometimes (0.5) you can hear what he says and others it's it's [very ( )]
- A: [I think he] speaks very well
- considering=
- B: =Considering yes ( ) had it a while=
- A: =Yes
- B: But he doesn't have a bandage just has the hole
- A: Nu nothing there at all?=  
B: =No=  
A: =He's just got the hole there?=  
B: =Yeah he's got the hole but s most of them keep (.) have a scarf  
[or (.) ] with a little hole in it=  
A: [Mm hm] =Yes  
(3.0)
- C: Is that Tim?
- A: ((looking)) (2.0) Oh it's Tim
- B: Is it?=  
A: =Yes he's just coming back to do your drawer ((gets up to open the door))

This is the function of noticing that is most prominent in the literature of conversation analysis, but Sacks (1992b:166-170) and Moerman (1988:101-120) are concerned with the type of noticing that concerns intersubjective understanding and that can be described as preferred or dispreferred. It is something that is fundamental to Garfinkel's (1967) work, because his objective was to reveal the 'seen but unnoticed' practices of everyday life. It is, however, also something that those of us who spend long periods away from family, friends and familiar places are acutely aware of, because we are better placed to notice the changes that have occurred than those who are in continuous daily contact with persons, things, and places. Although the



absentee friend or relative can notice such changes more easily, all actors nevertheless notice changes in the appearance of the friends and relatives; they notice changes to the physical environment; and they notice accomplishments and myriad other things.

This noticing is prompted, Sacks (1992b:166-167) suggests, by the fact that whenever we meet a friend or acquaintance, we instantiate a 'private calender.' At the simplest level, this means remembering, if necessary, when we last met, but it also includes bringing to mind the history of the relationship, so that in addition to asking questions about the other actor's present circumstances, one also asks questions that display an awareness of the past. As Sacks (1992b:167) explains,

Let's say someone visits your house some *nth* non-first time. And they walk through the house and say, "Gee that's new isn't it?" And you say "Yeah, I got it a couple of months after the last time you were here," or "I just got it," etc. Consider that as one of the ways in which, as between two parties, one goes about showing the other 'how much you're in my mind,' i.e. on any given occasion of looking through your place, I can see the sorts of changes that have been made since I last visited you, and show them to you. I can find things that have changed in 'our time,' i.e., time that is only marked by our relationship. And you too can see, even though maybe lots of people come over to your house, that this item was purchased, not in 'February 1967,' but 'after your last visit,' whenever that was.

Moerman (1988:127) provides an example that illustrates this type of noticing. It is taken from a recording of a conversation between two American middle-class couples. One couple are called George and Gwen and they are visiting the home of their friends Helen and Hal:

George	Hey: (.) the place looks <u>d</u> ifferent
Gwen	Y::ea::h ((falsetto rise-fall))
Helen	Ya see a[ll ou:r new]
Hal	[It doe:s? ]
George	Oh yeah. [ (Since - ) ]
Helen	[all our new] things
	(.)
George	Since we were here you: rearr <u>a</u> nged things.

George does not ask Helen and Hal when they bought the new things they have or when they rearranged their belongings, but instead he instantiates their private calender and notes that the changes have taken place 'since we were here.' The data Moerman (1988:23) uses are drawn from recordings of the talk of 'American middle-class participants,' on the one hand, and Northern Thai villagers, on the other. Moerman (*ibid.*) notes that while the American practice of 'having friends over to the house for dinner' might make little sense to the Thai villager, the latter 'would understand, as it is perhaps universal, that the activity of 'being friends' requires showing that one monitors and takes an interest in the world of the other.'

Actors' 'noticings' do not just relate to changes that have occurred, but they are also designed to display a knowledge of the other person's interests, beliefs, experience, problems, and so on. In the data extract below, which is taken from the same family conversation as the one on page 168 above, the male relative (C) describes a 'noticing' which is designed to please *B*, the wife. It is well known in the family that *B*'s husband likes to do any shopping as quickly as possible, while *B* prefers to shop in a leisurely fashion. The consequence is that *B* generally feels rushed, often has to make hasty decisions, and occasionally experiences problems. C's 'noticing' relates to this and concerns a woman he has seen in a supermarket whose shopping trips



appear to be similar to *B*'s.

[FF:C:96:61:1]

- C: I I went to Gateway's on on the way out=  
B: =Mm hmm=  
C: =an (.) er:: witnessed an example of um (0.5) what a a (.) pain in the neck (.) some men can be in supermarkets with their wives=  
B: =Re::ally?=  
C: =There was this bloke about John's age (.) with his wife ( ) an she was putting all her food on to the er (1.0) er conveyor belt the conveyor belt of the:: er (.) thing and he added her erm (1.0) loyalty card he put it down=  
B: =Oh::=  
C: =behind the food and she didn't see this [you know] he took it out and=  
B: [( Oh )]  
C: =just put it down so it was (.) like you know (.) a packet a biscuits and then this loyalty card ((laughs)) and (.) guess what happened to it=  
B: =It went through or [stopped the machine]  
C: [ Absolu::tely ] no it didn't stop the machine because it's it's too ( )=  
B: =Yeh but she lost it=  
C: =Yeh she lost it and she was so:: annoyed=  
B: =Silly devil

As the conversation moves on, *B* explains what cashiers do when plastic loyalty cards or charge cards disappear into the machinery of the check-out counter. *C* then reinforces the 'noticing' he has done for *B*'s benefit by saying that women shoppers in the queue who observed this incident sighed and gave one another knowing looks. In doing so, the women also displayed a preference for noticing and it involved empathizing with a woman in a familiar predicament.

What is implicit in Sacks' description of the use of 'private calenders', which in Garfinkel's (1967) terms is the documentary method of interpretation, is that the

willingness and ability of actors to invoke such calenders is indicative, over a number of conversations, of the nature of the relationship that exists between them. The persistent failure of one actor to take the time to notice things about another and to attend to them would be noticeable and accountable and would affect the relationship in some way.

The preference for noticing appears to provide two contrasting actions that might be suitable for inclusion in Levinson's (1983:336) table of 'recurrent and reliable patterns.' The action could be called 'Accomplishment' and the table could show that the preferred response is 'Notice' while the dispreferred is 'Take no notice'. However, the conversation analyst's response, as usual, would be that the patterns are *not* reliable and that the preferred action is determined by examining the indexical particulars of the utterance, drawing certain inferences, deciding which action to perform, and then examining subsequent utterances to see whether or not the other actor has treated the first action as preferred. The task of deciding what to notice about another actor is a sensitive one and some noticings will be preferred and others will be dispreferred. 'Noticing,' therefore, is something that ought to be on a list such as Levinson's (1983:336), but which cannot be, because the list does not allow for any complexity and does not, therefore, do justice to the concept of preference.

In addition to suggesting that some 'noticings' will be preferred and that others will be dispreferred, Sacks (1992b:296-298) notes that, in certain contexts, silence or a deliberate failure to notice particular actions might be the preferred action. When a mistake of some kind occurs, actors will often pretend not to notice it, or, if they



cannot avoid noticing it, they will make light of it. To illustrate this point, Sacks (1992b:297) describes a situation in which two couples go to a restaurant chosen by one of the wives. The restaurant proves to be dirty and the couple who are the guests realise that to comment on the dirt will involve criticising their hosts. The woman who chose the restaurant is called Kate and her husband is called Carl. Sacks (*ibid.*) says of the other woman in the party, the one who was invited to the restaurant, that

she can choose not to mention the dirtiness by virtue of the fact that if she did she would be embarrassing Kate in Carl's eyes. And now, though she doesn't care about the dirt, she could come away feeling terribly good-natured about not having said anything about it, by virtue of the fact that not having said anything about it, she's done a good deed to Kate. So here's a way in which, nothing having occurred, nonetheless someone can feel generous about not having made something of a thing that is structurally available to be made something of (*ibid.*).

What is particularly interesting about the preference for 'noticing' is that preference organization is generally discussed in terms of responses, and that texts such as Heritage (1984a), Levinson (1983), and Mey (1993) list the preferred and dispreferred responses to a small number of actions. What is therefore overlooked is the fact that actions are designed to achieve certain actions in response, and noticings are designed to show, as Sacks (1992b:167) says, 'how much you're in my mind,' and to achieve some acknowledgment of that fact. One might suggest that the failure to notice the condition of the restaurant in the example above is designed to show a reciprocity of perspectives, and to enable the guest to project the idea that if she were in the same position, the preferred action would be for *her* guests to ignore the problem.

#### 4.2.2 *The preference for 'being ordinary'*

Textbooks in discourse analysis and pragmatics, such as Cook (1989), Coulthard (1985), Mey (1993), Nunan (1993), and Yule (1996), refer to preference in connection with the actions of requesting, inviting, blaming, and so forth, all of which are conspicuous, but minor, compared to the preference for doing 'being ordinary.' The latter is almost totally inconspicuous in academic terms, but of major importance. It is perhaps the central example of the actions that comprise what Garfinkel (1967:44) called the ' "seen but unnoticed" background of common understandings,' and it is fundamental to ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.

Section 2.3.1 of this thesis mentioned the difficulty that Sacks (1992b:216) had in persuading his students that 'doing being ordinary' was an achievement and was not something that merely happened. The difficulty arises because common sense actions are invisible, as ten Have (1990) says, and the preference for doing 'being ordinary' becomes conspicuous primarily when an ordinary action is performed in a dispreferred manner. It was in order to demonstrate this point that Garfinkel (1967) designed a series of well-known experiments which involved actors engaging in ordinary, everyday interactions and then disrupting them. Their behaviour showed how strongly members of society react when one of their number does not conform to the preference for doing 'being ordinary.'

There are some people, such as poets and novelists, who are licensed by society to depart from the work of doing being ordinary, and whose behaviour is not therefore



accountable or sanctionable (Sacks 1992b:217). The actor, however, who is not so licensed, but who nevertheless sits by a swimming pool and comments on the effect of the wind on the water, rather than on mundane matters such as someone's appearance, is likely to be censured for her dispreferred behaviour. Sacks (1992b:219) adds that

if you come home and report what the grass looked like along the freeway, that there were four noticeable shades of green some of which just appeared yesterday because of the rain, then there might well be some tightening up on the part of your recipient. And if you do it routinely, then people might figure that there's something odd about you; that you're pretentious. You might find them jealous of you; you might lose friends. That is to say, you want to ask what are the costs, and if people have checked out the costs of venturing even slightly into making their life an epic.

P.G. Wodehouse provides, in *Madeline Bassett*, an amusing example of a character who wishes her life were an epic.

'Why did you come? Oh, I know what you are going to say. You felt that, cost what it might, you had to see me again, just once. You could not resist the urge to take away with you one last memory, which you could cherish down the years. Oh, Bertie, you remind me of Rudel.'

The name was new to me.

'Rudel?'

'The Seigneur Geoffrey Rudel, Prince of Blaye-en-Saintonge.'

I shook my head.

'Never met him, I'm afraid. Pal of yours?'

'He lived in the Middle Ages. He was a great poet. And he fell in love with the wife of the Lord of Tripoli.'

I stirred uneasily. I hoped she was going to keep it clean.

'For years he loved her, and at last he could resist no longer. He took ship to Tripoli, and his servants carried him ashore.'

'Not feeling so good?' I said, groping. 'Rough crossing?'

'He was dying. Of love.'

'Oh, ah.'

(Wodehouse 1953:44-45)

Children and foreigners are familiar examples of actors who have to learn what doing 'being ordinary' consists of in any given society in order to avoid performing dispreferred actions and experiencing the sanctions that may follow them. A vivid and memorable example of an individual struggling on a daily basis to do 'being ordinary' is provided by Garfinkel's (1967:116-185) study of Agnes, the transsexual. Agnes grew up as a boy in California, but assumed her female persona in her late teens. She then had to learn how to act like the young Californian woman she aspired to be. The effort involved in doing 'being ordinary' occupied all her waking moments and she had to learn how to dress, move, eat, talk and behave so that she would be accepted as just another ordinary young woman. Agnes' problem was that she lived with the secret that she had once been a young man and that instead of being a woman she was just 'passing' as one.

Agnes' solution was to escape from the world of those of ambivalent gender to the world of women. This escape meant that she was able to set about learning how preference organization operates among women, and she did so enthusiastically and meticulously. One of the methods she used is of particular interest to this thesis, because it surprised and disturbed Garfinkel. He had compared Agnes to a "secret apprentice" who was learning "to act like a lady" (*Ibid.*:146-147), and he explained that

Agnes was required to live up to ... standards of conduct, appearance, skills, feelings, motives, and aspirations while simultaneously learning what these standards were. To learn them was for her a continuous project of self-improvement. They had to be learned in situations in which she was treated by others as knowing them in the first place as a matter of course. They had to be learned in situations in which she was not able to indicate that she was learning them. They had to be learned by participating in situations where she was expected to know the very things that she was simultaneously being taught



*(Ibid.:147).*

Although Garfinkel has spent most of his adult life revealing and exploring the methods that actors use to create a sense of a rational world, it is interesting to discover a rare instance in which he seems to have been the indignant victim of one of his own breaching experiments.

An occasion that was very much like that of the secret apprenticeship was one in which she permitted the environment to furnish her the answers to its own questions. I came to think of it as the practice of "anticipatory following." This occurred, I regret to say, with disconcerting frequency in my conversations with her. When I read over the transcripts, and listened again to the taped interviews while preparing this paper, I was appalled by the number of occasions on which I was unable to decide whether Agnes was answering my questions or whether she had learned from my questions, and more importantly from more subtle cues both prior to and after the questions, what answers would do *(Ibid.)*.

Agnes did not know what common sense behaviour was for a young woman and she was therefore unsure of whether her actions were seen by others as preferred or dispreferred. Given that these things have to be learned, it seems surprising that Garfinkel did not expect that she would experiment on him and learn from him *(Ibid.:168)*. He not only knew her secret, but he was also an authority on the subject of social interaction. As such, he was as safe a male subject as she could find and he was an exceptionally perceptive one as well. However, such is the invisibility of common sense behaviour and the methods it employs that it seems that even the master ethnomethodologist was, on occasion, unable to detect the methods at work.

Although students of discourse analysis and pragmatics are introduced to the subject

of preference via examples of requests and invitations, they might gain considerably greater insight by reading Garfinkel's account of Agnes' struggle to be ordinary and for her behaviour to be seen as *unaccountable*. By considering the preference for doing 'being ordinary,' the reader would also learn that the study of preference organization is just as much concerned with the actions that are performed as it is with to the responses to them, contrary to the impression that the textbooks provide.

#### 4.2.3 *The preference for being informative*

This proposed preference expresses the widely-held belief (Grice 1975) that one actor should give another actor any information she has that is relevant to the latter, depending, of course, on the indexical circumstances. If it is appropriate for a person to give certain information to another, but if she fails to do so, the second actor can legitimately ask, 'Why didn't you tell me?' and she can sanction the behaviour of the first. As an illustration of this preference, Sacks (1992b:169-174) tells the story of two friends: Jeanette who works at a store called Bullocks and Estelle who does not. On one particular day, Jeanette had not been at work and Estelle had driven past the store and seen police cars and a crowd of people outside the store and some commotion inside. From the point of view of the employees of the store, anything of importance that happens at Bullocks is of relevance to them. Therefore, as Estelle has witnessed an important and dramatic event at Bullocks, she must consider whether or not to tell Jeanette. Estelle, however, knows that Jeanette will return to work the following day and will hear the news. This leads Sacks (1992b:173-174) to speculate in the following way,



If Estelle knows that Jeanette's going to find out tomorrow, why does she have to tell her? Why isn't it enough to know that Jeanette will find out tomorrow? For one, Jeanette might bring it up in a conversation with Estelle; "Oh you can't imagine what happened yesterday, I wasn't at work and all these exciting things happened ..." then Estelle is in a bad position, i.e. of saying "Yeah I know, I saw it." Which is to say, 'I saw it and I didn't tell you.' People can get annoyed if you don't tell them something that they nonetheless find out; they say "Well why didn't you tell me?" And if you say "I knew you would hear anyway" they nonetheless figure that you were somehow derelict, that you weren't monitoring the world for them as you should.

A related requirement is that when actors have important news to give, they should give it first to those whom it affects most closely. Hence, if an actor is in possession of news of births, marriages, deaths or other family business, that person should ensure that the appropriate people hear it first and that they should not have to ask why others heard the news before they did (Sacks 1992b:702-703). This is the preferred action, because it is neither noticeable nor accountable, but its preferred nature depends, of course, on the indexical particulars of the announcement.

One type of dispreferred action, therefore, would be to distribute information inappropriately. Another type would be to deliberately withhold an item of news from someone who had a right to hear it, and an example of that sort of withholding of family news was discussed in Section 4.1.5 above. That example was taken from a radio phone-in programme in the United Kingdom and consisted of an elderly female caller (*B*) telling a female programme presenter (*A*) about her exclusion from important family news:

[RS:PI:95:37:1]

- B: I'm talking about this wedding business erm (.) my niece I know it's years ago now (.) but erm (.) she I mean she was a grandmother twice three times over but erm (.) she got married (.) all in white (.) she had all the trimmings and everything (.) she was five months pregnant=  
A: =Mm hmm=  
B: =And she you know she went down the aisle as if nothing (.) you know (.) as well we was stunned (.) because I mean my husband and I (.) I mean we lived in the same house=  
A: =Mmm=  
B: =We lived downstairs and they lived upstairs=  
A: =Mm hmm=  
B: =And we didn't even know that she was pregnant=  
A: =Really=  
B: =No (.) we didn't know a thing=

Family members are justified in complaining about a relative who fails to keep them informed about matters of common interest (Sacks 1992a:702), and the elderly woman in the example above appears to be recounting a grievance of this sort that she has harboured for very many years.

Sacks (1992b:88-89) offers an amusing variation on this preference when he points out that it is not just important that the right people are informed, but that they should also be informed at the right time and in the right manner. He refers to a boy's announcement that he has just started shaving and says

the announcement is not, perhaps, the sort of thing that he would do at the beginning of the conversation - or if he did announce it at the beginning he would be claiming for it some sort of status that he might not want to claim for it. Now some things shouldn't go as touched off utterances in the middle of a conversation. If, for example, they're talking along and somebody says, "Harry and Mary just had a baby," then you wouldn't at that point say, "Hey I just had a baby." A thing like that should have gone at the beginning, it shouldn't be 'merely' touched off (*Ibid.*:89).



Some actors do, of course, give important news in this 'touched off' fashion, but such behaviour is frequently sanctioned as immature or improper. The incompetence of such a dispreferred action makes it a suitable subject for jokes. In the 1970s, Yugoslavs used to joke about two bumpkins called Haso and Muso. In one such joke, one of the characters was working in Germany and the other was at home in the village. The one in the village used to write regularly to the one in Germany and tell him what had been happening at home. In one letter, he gave various items of news and then wrote, 'Oh, and by the way, your cat has died.' The one in Germany wrote back and said that bad news should not be given in this 'touched off' manner. The writer, rather, should not only give prominence to the bad news, but should also build up to it and, as Schegloff (1988) has described, allow the reader to infer the unhappy event. In the joke, the bumpkin in Germany explains how the one at home should have broken the bad news. He says that the latter should have begun by saying that the cat was walking on the roof. Then, in the next letter, he should have said that the cat had slipped and fallen. In a third letter, he should have said that the cat had been badly injured and, in a fourth, he should have announced the sad denouement, if his friend had not already guessed it. The bumpkin at home absorbed this lesson and, some months later, he wrote to his friend and said, 'Your mother was walking on the roof.'

In addition to the proposed preference for being informative, there also appears to be a widely recognised preference for avoiding telling people what they already know (Sacks 1992b:21). In telling a story to another person, there is always the danger of telling that person the story for a second time. This would be a dispreferred action in

so far as it would be noticeable and accountable, and the hearer would be entitled to sanction the speaker for not displaying greater awareness of their past conversations (Levinson 1983:354). Sacks (1992b:21) points out that this error can be avoided by the use of a pre-sequence that would check whether the story had been told before. The response elicited by a question such as 'Did I mention that ... ?' would tell the speaker whether he or she should continue with the story, abandon it, or update it. The example below comes from a quantitative study of this form of preference in the speech of adolescents in Belfast (Wilson 1989).

N: Did you hear W's in jail?  
T: What?  
A: Aye caught mugging an old lady  
T: You're joking?  
N: No seriously ... he's a thug just like B there (laughs)  
(*Ibid.*:69)

Wilson (1989) recorded the conversation of schoolchildren who were well acquainted with one another and noted that 'of the 375 topic initiating turns [recorded], 72.78% were marked by a question/answer pair acting in the role of a pre-topic check' (*Ibid.*:39). Such pre-sequences are particularly common in the telling of jokes (Sacks1992b:470-498).

In addition to checking whether other people have already heard a particular story, pre-sequences also check whether another person has sufficient background knowledge to appreciate the story. In the extract below, which is taken from a recording of a family conversation in the United Kingdom, A's careful presentation of the background to her story gives B the opportunity to instantiate the appropriate



schemata, and her pauses also allow him the opportunity to interrupt and ask for clarification, as he does in his third turn.

[FF:C:96:77:1]

- A: I think a long a long while ago (.) I told you (.) about a a woman friend of ours who lived off Lymington Road (0.5) in a nice (.) cottage-style house and there were several burglaries (.) and er:: (.) near her (.) these burglars broke in and they had mas[ks on and all the rest of it] and I=  
B: [Oh:: yes yes I remember]  
A: =told you she changed ( )=  
B: =Yeh=  
A: =Well she moved to a flat just at the top of Mill Lane, Brierly Court (.)  
B: Where is that?=  
A: =Going up Mill Lane on the right opposite the pillar box=  
B: =The flats oh yes=  
A: =( ) and they're actually quite nice=  
B: =They are aren't they yeh I remember

The preferred action, here and in other situations, is to establish that a reciprocity of perspectives exists before embarking on the story. Although the speakers are members of the same family, they meet only a few times a year and at each meeting they need to instantiate their 'private calenders,' as Sacks (1992a:36-38) says, and try to remember what each has told the other. To fail to do so would lead one to question the interest that the other has in their conversations, and perhaps to make certain negative inferences.

In the extract above, A attempts to help B's recollection of an earlier story by using a locational term, 'off Lymington Road,' and to help his understanding of the development of the story by using a second such term, 'the top of Mill Lane, Brierly Court.' The use of locational terms is a subject that has attracted the interest of both

Sacks (1992b:145-149) and Schegloff ([1972b]1990), and the latter explains that interest in the following way:

for any location to which reference is made, there is a set of terms each of which, by a correspondence test, is a correct way to refer to it. On any actual occasion of use, however, not any member of the set is 'right'. How is it that on particular occasions of use some term from the set is selected, and other terms are rejected? Were I now to formulate where my notes are, it would be correct to say that they are: right in front of me, next to the telephone, on the desk, in my office, in the office, in Room 213, in Lewisohn Hall, on campus, at school, at Columbia, in Morningside Heights, on the upper West Side, in Manhattan, in New York City, in New York State, in the Northeast, on the Eastern Seaboard, in the United States, etc. Each of these terms could in some sense be correct ... were its relevance provided for (*Ibid.*:312).

The challenge then, in general terms, is to show why one term is selected rather than another, and why, in the data extract above, 'off Lymington Road' and 'at the top of Mill Lane, Brierly Court' are very appropriate selections. Schegloff (*Ibid.*:328-331) argues that this can be done by demonstrating the existence of two categories of locational term, the first of which consists of geographical terms. The second category, however, is what Schegloff (*Ibid.*) calls terms that relate to the member, and by member he means any party to the conversation. In the data extract above, therefore, alternative geographical terms for 'off Lymington Road' could have been 'near the Library,' 'just past the traffic lights,' 'by the surgery,' 'opposite the recreation ground,' 'close to the Red Lion' and so forth. Terms that relate to a member, however, and terms that *A* might use with someone other than *B*, could be such things as 'where Norma's mother lives,' 'where we play bridge,' 'where those two firemen were killed,' or 'where you and Ken used to go swimming.'

Schegloff (*Ibid.*:330-331) argues that there is a preference for the use of terms that



relate to a member over the use of geographical terms, whenever it is possible to do so, though he fails to explain why this should be so. This failure to make things explicit is, of course, one of the reasons why researchers in applied linguistics have difficulty in understanding the work of the sociologists who are responsible for so much of the literature of conversation analysis. However, Schegloff's reason for describing 'terms that relate to a member' as preferred is not hard to find.

The achievement of intersubjective understanding depends on the actors' employment of a reciprocity of perspectives and on the documentary method of interpretation. To achieve this shared understanding, they are obliged to bring to mind what each of them knows, values, believes, and so forth, and they are required to make use of this knowledge. Therefore, the type of locational term that is used should reflect the intersubjective understanding that the actors have. For example, in the data extract above, *A* chooses a geographical term, because *B* is only a visitor to the area and his knowledge is limited largely to the names of the main roads and landmarks. Her choice of 'off Lymington Road' is therefore a skilful one, because in referring to a place in the vicinity of the principal road in the area she offers a description that is truthful enough to satisfy her and general enough to satisfy *B*.

Although *B* has been visiting his relatives in the area for about twenty years and although he knows a number of *A*'s friends, *A* also recognises that his knowledge of her life and interests is piecemeal. Her choice of the geographical term, 'off Lymington Road,' therefore is neither noticeable nor accountable as far as *B* is concerned. She could easily have chosen a term that related to a member, such as 'down the road

from Gladys' or 'in the Knellers' old house,' but that choice would have been dispreferred because the terms would not have been understood by *B*. He would have noticed her choice and he might have inferred that she was perhaps not very attentive or very alert. However, the data extract shows that *A* could make the same inference about *B*, because he is slow to recognise her second locational term, 'just at the top of Mill Lane, Brierly Court.' Such a negative inference is possible because Mill Lane is only a few minutes away from *A*'s house and it is very familiar to *B*. In view of the fact that *A* not only gives *B* the name of the road, but also specifies which part of the road she is referring to, *B* should perhaps have been able to anticipate her announcement. Instead, he needs additional information before he can locate the address, which he then claims to know and admire.

In connection with his discussion of locational terms, Sacks (1992b:147) presents some related data, and he says that a very general rule can be extracted from it,

the rule being: When you are doing a description (much more generally than places), in the first instance pick, if you can, such a description as you know the other knows. Let me give you a really neat result of that. Here's the data:

- A: I'm reading one of Harold Sherman's books.  
B: Mm hm,  
A: I think we read one, one time, about life after death'r something.  
B: Mm hm  
A: And uh, this is How Tuh Make uh ESP Work For You.  
B: Mm hm,  
A: And it's excellent

The question that Sacks (*ibid.*:148) poses is why does *A* begin by saying that she is reading one of Harold Sherman's books, rather than by saying she is reading "How



to Make ESP Work for You"? His answer is that

if the rule 'pick some way of identifying an object which will permit the other to see that they know it' operates, then there is a real elegance to her selection. She finds a way to formulate that book which permits the other to see that the other knows, not that book but a book of the same class, i.e. 'Harold Sherman, we read one of his books.' That then locates this book in the way in which a title does not (*ibid.*:148).

Thus, actors choose locational terms such as 'off Lymington Road' or identifying terms such as 'one of Harold Sherman's books' because, in all conversation, utterances are designed for this actor in this situation at this moment, or as Schegloff ([1972b] 1990:346) puts it,

In selecting a 'right' formulation, attention is exhibited to 'where-we-know-we-are', to 'who-we-know-we-are', to 'what-we-are-doing-at-this-point-in-the-conversation'. A 'right' formulation exhibits, in the very fact of its production, that it is some '*this* conversation, at *this* place, with *these* members, at *this* point in its course' which has been analyzed to select *that* term; it exhibits, in the very fact of its production, that it is some particular 'this situation' which is producing it.

This proposed preference for being informative includes, therefore, telling others what they have a right to know; telling the appropriate actors first; telling them at the right time and in the right way; not telling them what they already know; and checking that they are in a position to understand the information. Although no reference to such a proposed preference appears in the literature, it is implicit in much of Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) work and it would no doubt have been made explicit had Sacks had the time to make it so.

#### 4.2.4 A preferred way of giving bad news

The marked / unmarked issue in relation to preference organization is an especially important one and it has figured prominently in this thesis. It was discussed briefly in the introduction and then at greater length in the evaluation of Levinson's (1983) enduring work, and it is interesting to note that Levinson's (1983) apparent identification of markedness and preference is still accepted by the most recent writers on the subject (Ahrens 1997; Kotthoff 1993). Markedness is particularly important, however, because of its ability to mislead and, in order to illustrate this point, the thesis will consider an example that comes right from the heart of the literature on conversation analysis. That example is Schegloff's (1988a) celebrated paper, "On an actual virtual servo-mechanism for guessing bad news: a single case conjecture." The meaning of his intriguing title can be seen in the data extract below and in the explanation that follows it. The extract is taken from a telephone conversation in which Belle tells Fanny about a former mutual friend.

Belle: ... I, I - I had something (.) terrible t'tell you.=  
=So [ uh: ]  
Fanny: [How t]errible [is it. ]  
Belle: [hhhhh]  
(.)  
Belle: Uh: ez worse it could be.  
(0.7)  
Fanny: Wy'mean Ida?  
(.)  
Belle: Uh yah hh=  
Fanny: =Wud she do die?=  
Belle: =Mm:hm.  
(.)  
Fanny: When did she die  
(Schegloff 1988:443)



Schegloff (1988a:443) credits Harvey Sacks with the observation that when it comes to telling bad news, the talk can be organized in such a way that it is the recipient of the bad news who is actually responsible for uttering it. Thus, in the example above, Belle is the one who has the news of Ida's death, but it is Fanny who eventually articulates it. Schegloff (*ibid.*), however, notes something more interesting, which is that the actor in possession of the bad news can steer the other person towards the correct guess by the different ways in which she responds to guesses.

This means that the person in possession of the bad news compares the guess made with the actual state of affairs and, somewhat like a servo-mechanism, her responses trigger the adjustments necessary to bring the guess and the bad news into a state of alignment. This process can be seen in the data extract below.

Hyla and Nancy are two college friends who have just been discussing Hyla's "social life," and in particular her failure to hear from a young man ("Richard") from another city who had promised to write first. ("Sim" is a young man in Hyla's home town whom she dates, but who is not as strong an object of attraction).

- 1 Hyla: Y'know w't I did las' ni:[ght?
- 2 Nancy: [Wha:t,=
- 3 Hyla: =Did a terrible thi::[ng,
- 4 Nancy: [You called Si:m,
- 5 (0.4)
- 6 Hyla: No:,
- 7 (0.2)
- 8 Nancy: What,
- 9 (.)
- 10 Hyla: t hhhh [Well I hed]
- 11 Nancy: [You called] Ri:chard,=
- 12 ( ): =hh-hh=
- 13 Hyla: =(h)y(h)Yea(h)h en I h(h)ung up w(h)un 'e
- 14 a(h)ns[wer
- 15 Nancy: [Oh: Hyla why::::,  
(Schegloff 1988:451-452)

In her second turn (line 3), Hyla announces that she has done something terrible, and Nancy makes a guess as to what that terrible thing is even before Hyla has finished speaking. That guess is followed by a pause, Hyla's rejection of the guess, and another very short pause. Having failed to guess correctly, Nancy therefore asks Hyla what the terrible thing was, but, as Hyla begins to answer, she makes a second guess, which proves to be successful. Nancy's achievement was to consider all the 'terrible' things that Hyla might have done and to very quickly identify the correct one, and Schegloff's important insight was that a conversational mechanism, functioning in some way like a servo-mechanism, helped Nancy to find the answer.

That mechanism works in the following way. When an actor makes a guess as to the nature of a piece of bad news, and if that guess is not correct, then it must be either worse than the actual news or not so bad as the actual news. If the guess is worse than the actual news, the response from the actor with the news is immediate or overlapping, as in the following invented example in which a student asks a lecturer about the results of an examination:

\*Student: Could you tell me how I got on in the exam?  
Lecturer: (2.0) Well I'm afraid it wasn't a particularly good result=  
Student: =I failed=  
Lecturer: =No no no (.) you got a 'D' but you should have done a lot better

On the other hand, when the guess is not so bad as the actual result, then the response is delayed. The delay tells the guesser that the news is worse than she thinks and that she should either guess again or just prepare herself for what is to come. In the invented circumstances of the student and the lecturer, the mechanism



would work as follows:

\*Student: Could you tell me how I got on in the exam?  
Lecturer: (2.0) Well I'm afraid it wasn't a particularly good result  
Student: Was it a 'D'?  
(1.0)  
Lecturer: Ah:::m (.) as a matter of fact=  
Student: =I failed  
Lecturer: I'm afraid so

The revelation of the workings of this mechanism is both fascinating and useful, and students at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam have seen examples such as those above, and they claim that a similar mechanism operates in Malay.

Schegloff's (1988a:447) argument, applied to the above examples, would be that the immediate response of the lecturer in the first example is done 'as a preferred response' because it is unmarked, while the delayed response in the second example is done 'as a dispreferred response' because it is marked. What is not so useful about this description is that Schegloff (1988a) allows markedness to appear to correspond with preference, and this thesis has argued that the identification of the two is unhelpful, because it has misled so many researchers

Preference is, in fact, a reflection of a much deeper interactional force: normative accountability. Actors are morally responsible for the way that behave, and they observe the way in which other members of society behave and speak, and they draw appropriate inferences from those actions and words. Hence, it would have been more useful if Schegloff (1988a) had explained that the response in the first example is

preferred because it is neither noticeable nor accountable, while the response in the second example is dispreferred because it is both. The one-second pause after the 'not so bad' guess in the second invented example is noticeable and gives rise to the question "Why that now?" (Bilmes 1985). On noticing the pause and reflecting on its placement, the actor who has made the 'not so bad' guess should infer that a worse guess is required or that a worse state of affairs is likely to be revealed. The use of this mechanism, however, requires the ability to employ a reciprocity of perspectives and the documentary method of interpretation, and those who are unable to do this, such as some foreign doctors in British hospitals (Parkinson 1980), have been sanctioned for their failure to give bad news in a preferred manner.

Schegloff's (1988a) account of the actual virtual servo-mechanism is a particularly vivid and memorable example of a widespread approach that actors use when giving bad news, and a hospital is one place where bad news is routinely given. Maynard (1989, 1992) has investigated the way in which doctors give bad news to the parents of young children, and he quotes a mother's description of how she learnt that she had given birth to a Down's Syndrome child.

And you know he [the father] was just acting so strangely and by then you get all these apprehensive feelings which I had during the pregnancy anyhow. And then the doctor came in and he drew the curtains around my cubicle and I thought, oh no, you know. And he told me that the baby was born completely healthy, but he's not completely normal. And I looked at him and I said, he's mongoloid. And I've never seen a mongoloid baby before in my life, but all of a sudden the flat features, the thrusting of the tongue, you know, just kind of hit me in the face. And that poor doctor couldn't bring himself to say the word. He said, it shouldn't have happened to you, not to your age bracket (Maynard 1992:332-333).

This quotation illustrates very clearly the indexical and reflexive nature of utterances,



and it suggests perhaps that the routine for giving bad news is now so well known that there are times when it might cause additional stress to those who are waiting to receive it.

Maynard's (1989, 1992) research concerns the giving of bad news to the parents of children who have been diagnosed as mentally handicapped. It is particularly interesting because it reveals the techniques which doctors employ both to prepare the parents for the bad news, and to align the different perspectives of the doctor and the parents. The perspectives need to be aligned, because the young patients are the children whom the doctors have diagnosed as being retarded, but whom the parents see as being merely slow to learn something at this point in their lives and not as slow for all time. His research shows that doctors attempt to incorporate the parents' perspective into the delivery of diagnostic news (Maynard 1992), by establishing, among other things, that a problem exists and then that the problem has certain characteristics. The establishment of common ground or shared perspectives is a necessary prerequisite for the acceptance of bad news.

Schegloff's (1988) actual virtual servo-mechanism is a singular type of reflexive mechanism, but something similar to it can be seen to be operating in the following data extract, in which a doctor talks to the parents of a retarded child.

- Father: You know I think basically the problem is as I also said to Ellen that uh when you reach the age of about four or four and a half (0.9) you more or less stop maturing right there (0.4)
- Doctor: Yeah (1.6) Well that kind of thing leads into what we found uh (0.2) hh essentially what we have found in Robert is that (0.4) at

(0.4) a certain point his development has stopped.  
 (0.2)  
 Father: Right  
 (0.2)  
 Doctor: A::nd uh::: (0.2) when tested (0.4) he then tends to look to us: like  
 a kid with retarded development.  
 Mother: Mm h[mm]  
 Father: [Mm]::=  
 Doctor: =This is a kid who's reached a certain point and then he stopped.  
 Father: Right.  
 (Maynard 1992:342-343)

In the doctor's first turn, he observes that the child's development has stopped. As his words echo those of the father, it is not surprising that the father agrees with them. However, in his second turn, the doctor characterizes the child as 'a kid with retarded development,' and this evaluation is not followed by agreement from the parents, but by 'neutral continuers' (*Ibid.*:343). The lack of agreement causes the doctor to reflexively reconstitute his assessment of the child and retreat to the position of a child whose development 'has stopped.' Thus, agreement and disagreement function like a servo-mechanism that steers the doctor through this sensitive encounter, and they show that although Schegloff's (1988) data and his analysis are striking and illuminating, the mechanism is, in fact, fundamental to intersubjective understanding. The data extracts also show that while markedness is important to preference organization, it is not the central feature.

This chapter has looked at the concept of preference as it is presented in the lectures of Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b), and it has described and illustrated that concept, and it has attempted to show that it is essentially a simple one. It will now return to the article by Bilmes (1988) and it will argue that Bilmes's (1988) work is difficult to apply



because it is based on two uncharacteristic accounts of preference in Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) lectures.

### ***4.3 Bilmes (1988) and the lectures of Harvey Sacks***

Section 3.4 above noted the importance of Bilmes (1988) in the literature of preference organization, but claimed that the influence of the work appears to have been more negative than positive. Preference organization is no longer part of the research agenda of conversation analysis, and this thesis has argued that Bilmes (1988) is in part responsible for that exclusion. That article not only failed to provide the promised clarification of the meaning of preference, but actually increased the confusion that enveloped the concept. One consequence of this increased confusion is that subsequent accounts of preference (Mey 1993; Yule 1996) have bypassed Bilmes (1988) in favour of Levinson (1983) or Heritage (1984a), and another is that little has been written about preference in the past decade.

The thesis also argues that the cause of the confusion fostered by Bilmes (1988) can be attributed to the way in which Bilmes makes use of two uncharacteristic discussions of preference in the lectures of Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b). Furthermore, Bilmes appears to interpret these two lectures in a manner that suits his own professional interests, and that involves the introduction of a quite different research perspective. The perspective is that of an anthropologist with an interest in the rules of ordering, but the connection between rules of ordering and preference is not explained adequately for an audience of sociolinguists, applied linguists, and language teachers.

This section will therefore describe what Sacks (1992b:367-369, 444-452) says in those lectures and will show how Bilmes (1988) interprets them.

The first of the two lectures that Bilmes selected centres on Sacks' (1992b:367-375) discussion of the data extract below, in which a male graduate student (B) telephones a female graduate student (C) who is a classmate and a friend of sorts.

- B: Oh I was just gonna say come out and come over here and talk this evening, but if you're going out // you can't very well do that.  
C: "Talk," you mean get drunk don't you?  
B: What?  
C: It's Saturday.  
B: What do you do. Go out and get drunk every Saturday?  
C: hm hehhh Well my folks are helping us to do it this evening.  
(1992b:367)

Sacks is interested in how the invitation to 'come over here and talk' could be heard as an invitation to get drunk. He notes that the terms used for invitations only partially formulate what is likely to happen if an invitation is accepted (*ibid.*), and he adds that

if somebody says "Come over for dinner this evening," then that's one way they might *describe* what we're going to do, but hardly does it *constrain* what we will do. "Come over for dinner" doesn't mean that there will be no talk or no anything else. So invitations partially formulate what the invitation is for (*ibid.*).

Hence, although other partial formulations of an invitation are possible, it is not the case, Sacks (*ibid.*) argues, that any possible partial formulation would be an acceptable invitation.



One can readily come up with more or less silly versions of a correct partial formulation of an evening which are not appropriately used ones, e.g. "Come over and have a drink of water," "Come over and sit on the living-room couch," etc. But how they differ from 'talk' and 'have dinner,' which are appropriately used, is not by virtue of that the former are partial and the latter are not. They are all partial (*Ibid.*).

Of these partial uses, Sacks (*Ibid.*:367-369) suggests, some are preferred and some are dispreferred. For example, if a person is being invited for an evening in which dinner is included, the preferred action is to make the guests aware of that fact in order to avoid embarrassing or discomfiting them, because such a consequence would be noticeable, accountable, and sanctionable.

Therefore, with reference to the opening data extract on page 196 above, Sacks (*Ibid.*:368) says that C hears that she is being invited for 'talk' and "it's her business to see that the invitation 'lacks something,' is to be read for what it says she's not being invited for." If C can infer that dinner is absent from the invitation, she can also infer the lack of something else, given that an invitation to somebody's house generally includes the offer of more than just 'talk' (*Ibid.*). The documentary method of interpretation allows her to infer that the missing parts of the partial invitation are activities that she would not find noticeable or accountable. Thus, C notes that the invitation has been issued on a Saturday, she associates the invitation with the typical behaviour of American college students of a certain type on a typical Saturday night (*Ibid.*:374-375), and she concludes that the missing element is 'getting drunk.'

That much is clear and uncontroversial, but one of the difficulties that Bilmes (1988) has magnified for his readers is introduced when Sacks (1992b:368) says that if you

consider what an invitation might involve,

there is a way of selecting from among partial formulations which says 'select first preference' such that if the partial formulation you select is not a first preference, then you're indicating that a first preference is not present. 'Talk' not being a first preference, a way of hearing it is to hear that it's not an invitation for what it otherwise might be, such that you *find* from 'talk' that dinner isn't being served. Whereas, 'dinner' being a first preference, hearing it, you are not to be engaged in finding what you're not being invited for.

This account incorporates an uncharacteristic element, and that is Sacks' use of the term 'first preference,' because he appears to be describing a system of ordering which reflects a general social rule to the effect that if there is a list of possible actions associated with an event, some will be more expected than others. Thus, the mention of something on a list implies that those items below it will be included, whereas those above it will not be. The mention of 'drinks' therefore excludes 'meal', but if 'meal' is mentioned then one can assume that 'drinks' will be included. The satisfaction of these expectations would, of course, be preferred behaviour, while the breaching of them would be dispreferred. Nevertheless, Sacks' (*Ibid.*) use of 'first preference' and 'second preference' and the suggestion of more preferences is uncharacteristic and complicated, and it allows Bilmes (1988:163) to claim that a principle of ordering is a major part of Sacks' notion of preference.

The suggestion of a system of ordering is significant for Bilmes, because he is an anthropologist who, like Moerman (1988), has employed conversation analysis in his ethnographic work. Bilmes (1988:163) believes that 'by postulating rules of ordering and conventional reasons for not doing prescribed actions, social scientists have in



some cases achieved impressive success in modeling certain domains of cultural behavior (e.g., Burling 1969; Goodenough 1956).’ Although Bilmes does not describe the content of these two articles, the reader who pursues them will find that they are concerned with complex rules of residence: who lives with whom among the Garo people of Assam (Burling 1969) and the inhabitants of the island of Truk in Micronesia (Goodenough 1956). For the former, there are ten rules of the ordering of the composition of a household, while for the latter there are just six. However, for the reader who is trying to understand the concept of preference in conversation analysis, the introduction of such rules of ordering is an unhelpful distraction and a considerable complication.

It is possible that when Sacks (1992b:368) used the term ‘first preference’ he was indeed experimenting with the notion of a system of ordering, because it is in fact present in his important papers on turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) and repair (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). However, it is not otherwise used and that is perhaps because of the difficulty of specifying the types of action that would fit between the preferred and unnoticeable at one extreme and the dispreferred and sanctionable at the other. Bilmes (1988) does not consider this difficulty, but chooses instead to describe the principle of ordering as one of ‘two aspects to Sacks’s notion of preference’ (*Ibid.*:163). Bilmes’ (1988) readers therefore receive a description of preference in which they are asked to see a connection between the residence rules of the Garo or the Trukese and the ways in which actors may display, or fail to display, intersubjective understanding.

Bilmes (1988) claims to find the principle of ordering in a second of Sacks' lectures, but, as we shall see, the connection is much more tenuous, and the consequent distortion of Sacks' argument so much greater. In this lecture, Sacks is concerned about the ways in which actors refer to people who are not present during a conversation. A woman, for example, who is not present could be referred to as Peggy, Mum, Mrs Smith, the lady with the red hair, the woman at number 16, my doctor, someone I used to work with, and so forth. All such descriptions, Sacks (1992b:444-452) says, are designed for particular recipients, and that, of course, is a maxim of conversation analysis. However, Sacks (*ibid.*) goes on to argue that there are two ways of identifying people and that one of them is preferred over the other. He calls them Type 1 identification and Type 2 identification.

Type 1 identification is one that the speaker produces with the intention of having the recipient use it to find some person that the recipient already knows. And a Type 2 identification is one that a speaker uses to indicate to the recipient that he should not employ it to attempt to find who, that he knows, is being referred to. In recipient terms, given a Type 1 identification it's the recipient's business to try to find from who, that he knows, is being referred to. And given a Type 2, it's his business to recognize that he's not to try to find from it who he knows that is being referred to (*ibid.*:445).

To justify his claim that Type 1 identification is preferred over Type 2, Sacks first presents three data extracts.

Jay:           Where'dju get the filing box from  
George:       From uh:: that fellow who usetuh sit in back of you, who, who got  
                  fired.  
Jay:           Jordan?  
George:       Jordan, yeah.

Another fragment:



Marge: Uh she asked me to stop by, she bought a chest of drawers from uhm (4.0) what's that gal's name? Just went back to Michigan? (2.0)  
 Marge: Helen uhm  
 Bea: Oh I know who you mean. (1.0) Brady- Brady.  
 Marge: Yeah. Helen Brady.  
 Bea: Mm hm

Another:

Rose: Uh because uhm I think uhm what's her name? uhm  
 Bea: Oh  
 Rose: That's on in the morning?  
 Bea: Sue?  
 Rose: Sue Brown, I- she usually stays until eleven.  
 (Sacks 1992b:450)

In each of the three examples, the speaker is trying to find a name and asks the recipient for help in recalling it. Sacks (*Ibid.*:451) argues that if Type 1 identifications were *not* preferred over Type 2 and if the speaker did *not* have a name, then he or she could simply use some other form of identification. That leads him to ask

why do the speakers, if they don't have the name, attempt to get the name from the recipient? One thing that's evidenced, anyway, is that speaker in these cases is oriented to whether the recipient knows the person. Being oriented to whether the recipient knows the person, and knowing that recipient knows the person, they can show that without having the name, by getting recipient to give them the name. Now, if the issue were only 'use Type 1 if you can,' by reference to 'if you have the name then use it,' then if you didn't have it you'd use some other identification. But the preference for a Type 1 operates to get speaker to try to find the name if he figures that recipient knows the person - even if that involves getting the name from recipient (*Ibid.*).

Sacks is saying, therefore, that in orienting to what the recipient might know, the speaker is demonstrating intersubjective understanding and a reciprocity of

perspectives. Although it might be quicker and simpler for the speaker to choose an alternative form of identification, the joint search for a name displays a desire to seek mutual understanding. The alternative, dispreferred approach might be to abandon the search for such understanding prematurely, thereby allowing the recipient to say, for example, "I knew who you were talking about" or "I could have told you that." The actor who does not attempt the search for intersubjective understanding or who does not try to view the action from the perspective of the other is behaving in a dispreferred manner, because her behaviour is noticeable, accountable, and clearly sanctionable.

The claim that Sacks (1992b:449-452) is concerned about intersubjective understanding, rather than the principle of ordering, is supported by his introduction of a familiar data extract in support of his discussion of Type 1 identifications.

The preference for Type 1s can operate where a speaker doesn't figure the recipient knows who's being referred to, but knows something that involves it in being an 'almost,' i.e. that you know someone in some close relationship to that one being referred to. The kinds of materials I'm talking about here involve things like:

Bea: I'm reading one of Harold Sherman's books.  
Marge: Mm hm  
Bea: I think we read one, one time, about life or death or something.  
Marge: Mm hm  
Bea: And uh this is how to make uh ESP work for you.

The idea here is, a book is being referred to. The book is not taken to be known by the recipient. It could be referred to as "I'm reading a book you've never read." Instead what's done is to find some way of referring to the book - here, via the author - which makes it an 'almost known' thing: You know the author of the books of which this is one book. Where here we can see a rather elaborately found way to make this an 'almost Type 1' identification (Sacks 1992b:451-452).



Despite the interest that Sacks (*ibid.*) displays in how intersubjective understanding is created, and despite a later, clearer, and better-known discussion of the same data (Sacks and Schegloff 1979), Bilmes (1988:170) insists that 'Sacks' emphasis here is on the principle of ordering.' Bilmes' grounds for such a claim amount to little more than the fact that Sacks has uncharacteristically chosen in this lecture to use the terms 'Type 1' and 'Type 2' rather than 'preferred' and 'dispreferred.' What Bilmes did, in fact, was to review the published and unpublished lectures that were available in the mid-nineteen-eighties and to choose two lectures in which it might be said that Sacks is employing a principle of ordering, and that choice, it has been argued, might well have reflected his anthropological interests.

This thesis, on the other hand, has reviewed the one hundred and sixty or so lectures that have been published in the 'Collected Lectures,' and it has chosen examples from the many lectures in which Sacks gives a quite different account of preference from that presented by Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), Taylor and Cameron (1987), and Bilmes (1988). What emerges from the lectures is a clear, consistent, and convincing account of preference, and, most importantly, an account of preference that students of applied linguistics will be able to understand and apply. The final section of this chapter will contribute a note on the relationship between 'context free' and 'context sensitive' forms of preference, and will then summarise what has been said about preference. The revised notion of preference will be applied, in Chapter Five, to a study of compliments.

#### 4.4 A note on context

Before concluding this fourth chapter, it is necessary to address an issue that has been mentioned a number of times in the thesis, and that is the relationship between the 'context free' models of preference and their 'context sensitive' applications (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974:699). The need to mention this relationship derives in large part from the misrepresentation of preference in Levinson's (1983:336) table of 'recurrent and reliable patterns' of actions, and the claim of misrepresentation centres on the fact that the actions depicted in the table, apart from being few in number and being linked to markedness, are all 'context free' actions (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974:699).

The existence of such a table would be of considerable pedagogical value if it helped the student to see that preference organization is a characteristic of all social interaction and that it is not confined to the five actions (requesting, offering/inviting, assessing, questioning, and blaming) that are familiar from Levinson (1983:336) and from those who quote him; and if were possible to list not just 'context free' models of preference, but also some 'context sensitive' applications. However, such diversity is not suitable for presentation on a table of actions and responses and it is not surprising that distortion and misrepresentation are the result. What is surprising, however, is Levinson's (1983) failure to articulate, for students of pragmatics, the connection between the 'context free' and the 'context sensitive' nature of preference organization (Coulter 1983:362-363). What the student sees, instead, is the readiness of many discourse analysts and conversation analysts to state, for example, that the



preferred response to a request is compliance, while the dispreferred response is rejection. Such an assertion is a real hindrance to a student's understanding of the fact that actions are jointly constituted and reconstituted by those who participate in an exchange and that preferred actions and responses are an outcome of that activity, and not fixed elements that are inserted into it. This section will therefore argue briefly that it is important, for the student of EFL and applied linguistics, that the relationship between 'context free' and 'context sensitive' be clear, and this section will attempt to clarify it in two ways: firstly, by quoting what Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) have to say about it; and, secondly, by using a metaphor from the work of Alfred Schutz (1962) to illustrate the link.

The simplest account of the meaning of 'context free' and 'context sensitive' in the literature of conversation analysis is found in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974:699) important paper on turn-taking:

When we speak of 'context-free' and 'context-sensitive,' we cannot state the scope of reference of 'context' that is relevant. For now, let it suffice to employ a long-term understanding of 'context' in the social sciences - one which attends the various places, times, and identities of parties to interaction. What we mean to note is that major aspects of the organization of turn-taking are insensitive to such parameters of context, and are, in that sense, 'context-free'; but it remains the case that examination of any particular materials will display the context-free resources of the turn-taking system to be employed, disposed in ways fitted to particulars of context. It is the context-free structure which defines how and where context-sensitivity can be displayed; the particularities of context are exhibited in systematically organized ways and places, and those are shaped by the context-free organization.

The context-free structure cannot, of course, be demonstrated, because there are no context-free utterances. One might suggest that Sacks' (1992a:3) opening data extract

A: Hello  
B: Hello

is close to being 'context free,' because it can occur in a number of contexts, but given that it would be a noticeable and accountable exchange in many other contexts, it is clearly not context free. However, it contrasts interestingly with a more context sensitive opening exchange that is described by Schegloff (1986) in his study of telephone conversations. This example is 'context sensitive' because the two actors know one another well:

Ava: H'llo:?  
Bee: hHi:.  
Ava: Hi:?  
(*ibid.*:127)

In this case, Ava is able to identify Bee on the basis of just a brief sample of the latter's voice. Schegloff (*ibid.*) suggests that the closer the relationship between two people, the briefer the voice sample offered for recognition can be, and he argues, as does Levinson (1983:343-345), that the preferred action is for people to recognize the voices of their friends and relatives, and that the dispreferred action would be for those individuals to have to identify themselves. Hence, if a person phones her mother, for example, and if the mother has good hearing, if the connection is clear, and if circumstances are otherwise normal, she should not have to identify herself. A request for identification would be noticeable, accountable, and possibly sanctionable, although one can of course imagine circumstances in which an identification might be given.



Thus, although actors are aware of the difference that context makes to their actions, the literature of conversation analysis does not make the link between 'context free' models of preference organization and 'context sensitive' applications explicit. This is perhaps the result of the neglect of the ethnomethodological and phenomenological roots of the subject, because an interesting and useful metaphor is to be found there. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that metaphors help structure the way that way that we think, and one that seems capable of clarifying the relationship between 'context free' and 'context sensitive' forms of preference is Schutz' (1962) suggestion that all perceptions have an 'inner horizon' and an 'outer horizon', so that

what I am perceiving is only one aspect of the thing. Not only when I move around do other aspects appear. In addition, the aspect of the thing caught by my perceiving act suggests other possible aspects: the front side of the house suggests its back, the facade the interior, the roof the unseen foundation and so on. All these moments together may be called the "inner horizon" of the perceived object, and it can be systematically explored by following the intentional indications within the noema itself. But there is an outer horizon too. The tree refers to my garden, the garden to the street, to the city, to the country in which I am living and finally to the whole universe. Every perception of a "detail" refers to the thing to which it pertains, the thing to other things over against which it stands out and which I call its background. There is not an isolated object as such, but a field of perceptions and cogitations with a halo, with a horizon or, to use a term of William James, with fringes relating it to other things (*Ibid.*:108).

The discovery of this little-known metaphor has been of considerable value to this thesis, because it has helped to conceptualize the relationship between some very general and 'context free' actions, and their local, 'context sensitive' applications. The metaphor allows us to see the local, 'context sensitive' actions as representing a number of inner horizons beyond which one can see the all-encompassing outer

horizon of the general, 'context free' form of the preference, and it allows us to see the connection between the two. The metaphor also enables the researcher to impose some shape on a large and disparate number of forms of preference and to recognize, as Sacks (1984:22) says, that 'there is order at all points'. This metaphor is, of course, a personal choice and its appeal might not be that extensive. Nevertheless, some way must be found to show students that preference organization is not a limited, formulaic activity, and that it is in fact central to social interaction.

#### **4.5 Preference organization: A summary**

This thesis was motivated by an interest in the study of compliments and responses, and by a desire to understand what a preferred or dispreferred response to a compliment was. The interest developed long before the publication of Sacks' (1992a, 1992b) collected lectures and at a time when students turned to Levinson (1983), Heritage (1984a), Taylor and Cameron (1987), and Bilmes (1988) for an understanding of conversation analysis and preference organization. Not only did students rely on these important sources, but so did academics (Cook 1989; Coulthard 1985; Langford 1994; Mey 1993; Nunan 1993; Tsui 1995; and Yule 1996). However, if these textbook writers had any reservations about the description of preference offered by Levinson (1983) and others, they failed to inform their readers. They also failed to note that the scope of preference organization, as defined by Levinson (1983) and Heritage (1984a), was excessively narrow and that it encompassed only requests, invitations, offers, and a few other actions. What perhaps obscured their vision was the fact that



Levinson's (1983) argument in support of the connection between markedness and preference was not only elegant and persuasive, but it was also eminently suitable for textbook exposition. Hence, a mere feature of preference organization in a very small number of actions came to represent the entire concept, and a misunderstanding became entrenched in the secondary literature of conversation analysis and discourse analysis. In fact, the research literature was also affected, because Levinson's (1983) account of preference organization is accepted by Ahrens (1997), Buchanan and Middleton (1993), Kotthoff (1993), Li Wei and Milroy (1995), Norrick (1991), and Trosborg (1994), among others.

This thesis argues, however, that the number of research articles affected is relatively small, because the concept of preference, as presented by Levinson (1983) and others, is unusable beyond Levinson's restricted examples, and it has tried to show that those who have attempted to use it in other circumstances (Greenleaf and Freedman 1993; Norrick 1991; and Taylor 1994) have only created further misunderstanding. Such misunderstanding is unavoidable if one accepts that a preferred or dispreferred response is equivalent to an unmarked or a marked response (Sections 1.2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5.1, 4.1.5, & 4.2.4); if one believes that frequency of occurrence is an adequate criterion of preference (Sections 3.3 & 4.1.5); if one assumes that preference organization is concerned only with responses to actions and not with what actions are designed to achieve (Sections 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2.1, & 4.2.2); if one thinks that Levinson's (1983:363) table of 'recurrent and reliable patterns' is an adequate representation of preference (Sections 1.2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.5, 4.1.6, 4.2.1, & 4.4.); and if one can be persuaded that the important question is not

how actors constitute preferred and dispreferred actions, but rather *why* they do so (Sections 1.2.3, 3.2, 3.3, & 4.1.3).

Thus, the original interest in compliments led to a search for the meaning of preference. That search revealed that no clear, consistent, or reliable account of preference was available in the literature, and it indicated that the solution was to turn to the primary sources of the concept of preference. The publication of two volumes of Harvey Sacks' lectures in 1992 made such a solution possible and the search moved to the sixteen hundred pages of transcribed lectures. The examination of the primary sources could not, however, be confined to Sacks' writing, and that was because this thesis contends that preference organization cannot be understood without a knowledge of the ethnomethodological foundations of conversation analysis. Hence, the search was a twofold one. On the one hand, there was a need to understand what Sacks had said in his lectures, and, on the other, there was a desire to rediscover the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis (Atkinson 1988; Clayman and Maynard 1995; Maynard and Clayman 1991; and Williams 1992). The second objective has important pedagogical implications, because the thesis has noted that although Sacks and his contemporaries took such foundations for granted, a knowledge of the theoretical basis of conversation analysis is very limited among those, such as applied linguists, who form a substantial part of the subject's current audience.

When conversation analysis is viewed as an ethnomethodological enterprise, a new concept of preference can emerge; in fact, it emerges in the very first lecture that



Sacks (1992a:1-11) delivered. He offered a commonplace exchange

- A: This is Mr Smith may I help you  
B: Yes, this is Mr Brown

and he contrasted it with the following:

- A: This is Mr Smith may I help you  
B: I can't hear you.  
A: This is Mr Smith.  
B: Smith.  
(Sacks 1992a:1)

Sacks (1992a:1-11) demonstrated that one of these exchanges illustrates preferred actions, and that the other illustrates a dispreferred action. In doing so, he used a criterion that is clear, consistent, and reliable. Sacks (*Ibid.*) argued that the actions in the first exchange were unremarkable, and therefore neither noticeable nor accountable. No first speaker, having said, 'This is Mr Smith may I help you,' and having heard, 'Yes, this is Mr Brown,' would have reason to question the nature of Mr Brown's answer, because it is an expected response and, as such, it is 'seen but unnoticed'. The actions of both speakers are preferred and these actions give rise to no troublesome inferences about the behaviour of either man. In this first extract, however, Levinson's (1983) criteria of markedness and of 'regular and reliable patterns' would also identify the exchange as preferred, as would the criterion of frequency of occurrence. These criteria fare well when the exchange is a preferred one; when it is dispreferred, though, the problems appear.

The frailty of Levinson's (1983) criteria can be seen most easily in the second exchange, because that breaches the conventions of a routine opening of a telephone conversation (Schegloff 1986), and in doing so it reveals the operation of the system of preference. *A*'s actions are designed, once again, to get a name from the caller and to offer help, and *A* identifies himself and offers help in what appears to be a preferred manner. *B*, however, does not respond with an acceptance and an identification. Instead, he claims to be unable to hear *A*, and this failure to hear is noticeable and accountable. *A* inevitably asks himself why, when so many other callers have had no difficulty in hearing him, should *B* be unable to hear. *B*'s response would lead *A* to draw on his knowledge of other callers who have given dispreferred responses, and to infer, among other things, that *B* is reluctant to give his name (Sacks 1985).

It was therefore at that very moment when *B* failed to reciprocate *A*'s identification and to answer his question that Sacks (1992a:1-11) was able to determine that *B*'s action was dispreferred, and he did so on the basis of noticeable absence and accountability. Sacks was able to identify *B*'s response as dispreferred because of his knowledge of the 'ethno' methods of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives. This knowledge also involves a recognition of the necessity of observing the sequential development of an interaction in order to suggest how an interaction might be interpreted. The 'ethno' methods tell an actor how an utterance such as 'May I help you?' should be responded to in a given situation, and they enable the actor to identify the absence of an expected response as noticeable and accountable. On hearing a response such as 'I can't hear you,' rather than, 'Yes, this is Mr Brown,' the first speaker must ask himself, 'Why that



now?' (Bilmes 1985). Thus, the noticeable absence of an expected response is accountable, and it necessitates inferences about the speaker's behaviour and intentions (Sacks 1985). From an ethnomethodological perspective, therefore, it is accountability and the inferences that this gives rise to that are the essence of preference organization.

However, no student using the criterion of markedness would be able to make the same assured claim that Sacks (1992a:1-11) made. Neither would a person who took frequency of occurrence as a criterion be able to say confidently that *B*'s response was dispreferred. Furthermore, those who place their faith in Levinson's (1983) table of 'recurrent and reliable patterns' would require a table that was a great deal more complex if it were to include such an exchange; and even if such a table were compiled it would not be clear whether the table would put a response such as, 'I can't hear you,' under the preferred or the dispreferred heading. Finally, it should be clear that 'face' cannot offer a principled explanation of why *B*'s response in the example above is dispreferred. A discussion of psychological motivation merely delays the discovery of the way in which preference works.

This summary began by restating the fact that the study of preference organization was a response to problems encountered in work on compliments, and that the absence of a clear, consistent and reliable criterion for identifying a response to a compliment as preferred or dispreferred meant that researchers had no principled means of saying that an utterance either was or was not a compliment. Now that such a criterion exists, the final chapter of this thesis will re-examine existing work on

compliments and will seek to demonstrate that complimenting is a complex, interactive process, and that this fundamental conception is almost entirely absent from the literature.



## Chapter Five

### 5. The pedagogical applications

The interest in compliments that was the point of departure for this thesis led to an examination of the meaning of preference organization by way of a lengthy study of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. The focus so far, therefore, has been on research or, to use Garfinkel's (1967:173) metaphor, on the submerged nine-tenths of the iceberg, and it is now appropriate to concentrate on the spoken data that comprise the exposed section of the iceberg, and to show how an understanding of the ethnomethodological foundations of conversation analysis can give the student a considerably greater insight into the richness of the data and the ways in which they can be explored. The data that will be examined in this chapter consist of compliments and they will be drawn from the corpus described in Chapter One. The study of complimenting in EFL and Applied Linguistics has been dominated by the sociolinguistic approach initiated by Wolfson and Manes (Wolfson 1981; Manes and Wolfson 1981), and this chapter will use the data collected for this thesis in order to demonstrate just how constricting this sociolinguistic approach is and how unsurprising are its discoveries. The chapter will offer a pedagogical alternative to the sociolinguistic study not only of compliments but also of other forms of conversational interaction. It will argue throughout that complimenting is a complex activity which has to be constructed interactionally, and that reliance on linguistic form is not an adequate

guide as to whether an utterance is or is not a compliment.

The chapter will begin by examining the sociolinguistic research on compliments, and it will draw a parallel between a problem that besets that work and a problem that has affected preference organization. It will demonstrate that the substantial and uniform literature on compliments is the product of a particular methodological approach, and that the employment of the different methodology of conversation analysis is capable of revealing a more diverse picture of how actors constitute compliments. The chapter will argue that a revised approach to the study of compliments has considerable relevance for the EFL classroom.

In demonstrating the methodological differences between the sociolinguistic and conversation analytic approaches, the chapter will reiterate the fact that conversation analysis sees actions as locally situated and as locally constituted, and therefore as actions that are understandable in terms of the indexical particulars that shape their creation (as Section 2.1.1 argued). Conversation analysis is thus a qualitative approach, and it often results in detailed, single case analyses (Schegloff 1987a). Researchers in sociolinguistics, on the other hand, and particularly those who write about compliments, seek quantifiable generalizations or standardizations from the data they collect. For conversation analysts, however, generalizations or 'context free' patterns of behaviour are incomplete without an understanding of their 'context sensitive' applications, and standardizations alone are treated as inadequate, as Garfinkel (1967:66-67) explains:



Social science theorists ... have used the fact of standardization to conceive the character and consequences of actions that comply with standardized expectancies. Generally they have acknowledged but otherwise neglected the fact that by these same actions persons discover, create, and sustain this standardization. An important and prevalent consequence of this neglect is that of being misled about the nature and conditions of stable actions. This occurs by making out the member of the society to be a judgmental dope of a cultural or psychological sort, or both, with the result that the *unpublished* results of any accomplished study of the relationship between actions and standardized expectations will invariably contain enough incongruous material to invite essential revision.

This chapter will describe the extensive and remarkably uniform literature on complimenting and it will argue that it serves to reinforce certain standardizations. It will suggest that this reinforcement occurs because of a convenient assumption that is made about the definition of a compliment, because of the way in which the data on compliments are collected, and because the pedagogical appeal of the research results is so considerable that some are prepared to overlook its methodological weaknesses and their implications (Holmes 1988b:463; Holmes and Brown 1987:524). It will argue that the methodology employed serves to exclude incongruous material and that, as a result, very little revision of the work on complimenting has taken place in the past fifteen years. Hence, recent studies of complimenting (Chen 1993; Chick 1996; Herbert 1997; Johnson 1992; Ylance-McEwan 1993) reveal results that are very similar to the early work of Wolfson and Manes (Wolfson 1981; Manes and Wolfson 1981), who were the pioneers of the sociolinguistic study of complimenting. This chapter will also suggest that those who engage in such research or who use the data in their classes risk making cultural dopes of their students by presenting them with a narrow view both of a compliment and of the manner in which actors arrive at mutual understanding.

## 5.1 Compliments

### 5.1.1 The sociolinguistic approach to the study of compliments

Wolfson and Manes (Manes 1983; Manes and Wolfson 1981; Wolfson 1981, 1983a, 1984) appear to be the first researchers to have adopted a quantitative approach to the study of compliments. The compliments they analyzed were collected in an ethnographic manner either by themselves or by their students (Manes and Wolfson 1981:116; Wolfson 1983a:84). Thus, the compliments were overheard and noted down and 'the observers were careful to take note of the sex, approximate age and occupation of both speaker and addressee, as well as their relationship to one another' (Manes and Wolfson 1981:116). The analysis of the data revealed that three syntactic patterns accounted for 85% of their data:

NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ	53.6%
I (really) {like/love} NP	16.1%
PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	14.9%

(*Ibid.*:120)

Furthermore, the data showed that where an adjective carried the positive semantic load in the compliment, two-thirds of all compliments made use of just five adjectives: nice, good, beautiful, pretty and great (*Ibid.*:117). Similarly, the number of semantically positive verbs used was very small, with 'like' and 'love' occurring 'in 86 per cent of all compliments which contain a semantically positive verb' (*Ibid.*:118). Because the 686



compliments analyzed by Manes and Wolfson (1981) revealed the use of only three syntactic patterns, five adjectives, and two verbs in the greater part of their data, Wolfson and Manes concluded that 'compliments are formulaic in nature' (Wolfson 1983:86). As such, their potential pedagogical appeal to teachers and students is likely to be considerable, and Holmes and Brown (1987:535) argue that

The formulaic nature of compliments - their syntactic and lexical predictability - makes them attractive ESL teaching material and provides an easy solution to the problem of how to express this speech act in English.

Furthermore, the revelation of the formula has proved popular with researchers, as the list below suggests.

The announcement that compliments in middle-class American speech are formulaic led to research among similar groups in New Zealand (Holmes 1988a; Holmes and Brown 1987) and among more diverse groups in South Africa (Chick 1996), among men and women in New Zealand (Holmes 1988b) and the United States (Herbert 1990), to a comparison of compliments in American English and South African English (Herbert 1989; Herbert and Straight 1989), in British English and in Finnish (Ylänne-McEwan 1993), in American English and Chinese (Chen 1993), in American English and Egyptian Arabic (Nelson, El Bakary, and Al Batal 1993), in American English and Polish (Herbert 1991, 1997), and in Polish (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989), as well as to a study of compliments in the writing of peer reviews (Johnson 1992) and to a study of the effects of gender in that genre (Johnson and Roen 1992; Roen and Johnson 1992). All of this research makes reference to the work of Manes and Wolfson (1981), much of it employs the methodology of Manes and Wolfson (1981),

and all of it reaches conclusions that reinforce Manes and Wolfson (1981).

Any researcher who wishes to replicate or build upon the work of Manes and Wolfson (1981) should face the same problem as the person who is interested in preference organization, and this is the parallel that was referred to in the opening paragraph. The problem is that such a person ought to have a reliable means of saying that utterance X or utterance Y either is or is not a compliment, just as the researcher in conversation analysis must be able to examine a recording or a transcript and have a means of saying that a given action is preferred or dispreferred. Surprisingly, though, Manes and Wolfson's (1981) student collectors did not ask this question and their teachers seem not to have been concerned about that omission.

As part of a seminar in sociolinguistics, students who had little or no background in this discipline were asked to contribute to our data by collecting compliments in everyday speech situations. It is noteworthy that the students, naive native speakers, did not ask that compliments be described or defined for them and indicated no confusion concerning what was expected of them. The data which they collected, with almost no exceptions, were unambiguously identifiable as compliments (*Ibid.*:127).

Student collectors, in such a situation, therefore collect only those utterances that they are sure are compliments and their collection proves to be narrow and formulaic. By excluding the marginal examples, the over-complex, the over-long, the idiosyncratic, and the otherwise incongruous, their results confirm their intuition about compliments, and these results are greeted as surprising and amazingly regular by their teachers (Wolfson 1983a:85). The circularity of this process is noted by Irvine (1986:243) in a review of Manes and Wolfson (1981). Irvine's (1986:243) criticism of this methodology



is quoted by Holmes (1988b:446) in her work on New Zealand compliments, but the only comment that Holmes (*Ibid.*) makes is that 'a thorough discussion of the pragmatic criteria which speakers use to identify compliments is much-needed.' However, it seems from the literature that neither Holmes nor other researchers have shown much interest in such criteria in the past ten years. Conversation analysts, on the other hand, have developed an effective criterion for determining whether an utterance is a compliment, in so far as such a thing is possible, and that involves examining both the response made by the recipient and the subsequent sequential development of the interaction in order to see what understandings are displayed by the parties to the interaction (Heritage and Atkinson 1984:10). The way in which this criterion operates and the way in which the conversation analytic approach to the study of compliments contrasts with the sociolinguistic approach will be made clear in the next section.

### *5.1.2 Conversation analysis and the study of compliments*

Unlike sociolinguists, conversation analysts avoid the use of data that is gathered by means of questionnaires, experiments, native speaker intuition, field notes, interviews, role plays, or the ethnographic method (Cohen 1996). Instead, they base their analyses on naturally-occurring data that are recorded on audio-tape or video-tape, and on detailed transcriptions of the recordings, and they do so for the following reasons. Firstly, they consider that anything recollected or imagined is a very poor substitute for the richness and diversity of naturally-occurring talk (Heritage and Atkinson 1984:3). The experience of conversation analysts shows, as Moerman

(1988:13) says, that 'made up or remembered instances can come only from what we already assume, know or think we know. They cannot surprise us or reveal anything new.' Thus, although Manes and Wolfson (1981) might have been surprised by the statistical outcome of their research, they should not have been surprised by the standardized nature of the examples that their students collected. Their claim that compliments are formulaic can only have come from a survey of standardized data, because it simply does not tally with common-sense knowledge of the richness and complexity of language use, as the data extracts in this chapter will show.

The second reason for using tape-recorded data is so that the texts can be stored and examined repeatedly, particularly 'in the light of new observations or findings' (Heritage and Atkinson 1984:4), and so that the data are 'available for public scrutiny in a way that further minimizes the influence of individual preconceptions' (*ibid.*). The texts that are tape-recorded and stored are, of course, capable of being a great deal longer than those that are overheard and noted down. For a conversation analyst, the existence of a longer text is essential, because, as we have seen, one of the principles of the discipline is that analysts examine subsequent utterances in order to see what understandings actors display of prior utterances.

As the sociolinguistic approach to the study of compliments is the dominant one in EFL and Applied Linguistics, it is instructive to contrast it with the way in which conversation analysts handle data. The difference between the two approaches can be illustrated by returning to a data extract that was discussed in Chapter 3, Section 2. The extract was taken from a recording of an interview on a national radio



programme in the United Kingdom. The interviewer (A) is a well-known critic of art and architecture and he is talking to a man who is an architect and a designer (B). They are discussing the building which represents B's latest work, and which A, in his introduction, refers to as 'a building that hopes to become another of London's best-known design landmarks.'

[RF:I:89:4:1]

- 1 A: With me is (Stuart Moscrop) who's the designer and architect of the  
 2 museum. It seems to me to be er (1.0) pleasantly modernist. Can I call  
 3 it that?=  
 4 B: =Call it what you like. If that's what it seems to you that's fine. Basically  
 5 what you're looking at is (.) the existing building over Shad Thames with  
 6 its terraces on to the river and what we've done is to protect the existing  
 7 brickwork (.) we've kept the original openings in the building these  
 8 windows that you're looking at (.) now (.) through onto River Thames  
 9 .hhh protected the brickwork with a skin of render and we've painted that  
 10 white=  
 11 A: =What does white have that (.) pink polka dots don't=  
 12 B: =This is the trademark of of straight modernist erm architecture an and  
 13 late twentieth century design. It is the most neutral classical colour for  
 14 the display of other (.) display or housing of other activities or objects and  
 15 three there's perfectly erm respectable English tradition of water that is  
 16 riverside or seaside (.) twentieth century buildings coloured white (.) I  
 17 suppose given those three (0.5) you don't need to look for a fourth  
 18 A: You've created a very (.) beautiful building a very seductive building.  
 19 You're going to be surrounded here by new apartment blocks a hotel lots  
 20 of shopping malls=as a context is that one that is encouraging for you  
 21 in this museum?=  
 22 B: =What I hope distinguishes Butler's Wharf from (.) other shall we say  
 23 (1.0) kind of mainstream commercial (.) developments or redevelopments  
 24 is that it is a genuine attempt at a real mixed-used development ...

It would be polite and appropriate for a discussion of an architect's most recent accomplishment to begin with a compliment, and the first utterance that A addresses to B, 'It seems pleasantly modernist to me,' is very close to Manes and Wolfson's

(1981) dominant syntactic pattern, NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ.

A student data collector who overheard such an utterance might intuitively identify it as a compliment and might record it in such a way that it came to be listed under the syntactic pattern, NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ. However reasonable that student's action in this situation, the thesis argues that she would be wrong to identify the utterance as a compliment, because in doing so she fails to take proper account of the indexical circumstances of the sequence in which the 'compliment' occurs. In particular, she fails to take note of *B*'s response to the 'compliment' and of *A*'s subsequent utterances.

Pomerantz (1978) has argued that in responding to compliments actors have to deal with two conflicting preferences: the preference for agreement and the preference for avoiding self-praise. Her work describes some of the many ways in which actors reconcile the two, but the first part of *B*'s response, 'Call it what you like. If that's what it seems to you that's fine,' is quite unlike any of the types of response she reports. In fact, this first part of *B*'s response is directed at *A*'s right to make an assessment, and it is the second part, 'Basically what you're looking at is ...,' which addresses itself to *A*'s assessment, 'It seems to me to be er (1.0) pleasantly modernist.' This assessment poses a problem for *B*, because, as Pomerantz (1978) notes, one of the standard responses to a compliment is to downgrade it and thereby avoid being thought immodest. However, a 'compliment' as weak as 'pleasantly modernist' can hardly be downgraded and *A*'s 'compliment' therefore places *B* in an interactionally difficult position.



The difficulty that *B* would otherwise have in responding to such a weak 'compliment' is eased, however, by *A*'s addition of the question, 'Can I call it that?,' because the insertion of a *question* means that an *answer* to the question is the conditionally relevant response (Sacks 1987), rather than a response to the 'compliment,' and *B* is therefore able to avoid responding to the assessment of his work. Nevertheless, *B*'s failure to respond to the description of his work as 'pleasantly modernist' is noticeable and accountable, because the assessment is a somewhat provocative one, as assessments are expected to be on arts programmes. Thus, *A* might account for *B*'s silence by inferring that *B* is not satisfied with *A*'s semantically weak compliment, or perhaps does not regard that evaluation of his work as complimentary at all.

This interpretation is reinforced by the utterance which begins *A*'s third turn (line 18), 'You've created a very (.) beautiful building a very seductive building.' What is noticeable here is that *A* not only rephrases his assessment of *B*'s work, but he strongly upgrades what he had earlier downgraded. He produces a positive statement that is not hedged in any way, and he replaces the semantically weak 'pleasantly modernist' with the much stronger adjectives 'beautiful' and 'seductive' and stresses both words. The term 'modernist' is dropped, because when applied to a new and important building called "The Design Museum" it is perhaps an unflatteringly obvious descriptor. Its use might suggest an inability or reluctance to find other features of the building that are more worthy of praise.

The significance of *A*'s utterance from the point of view of ethnomethodology or conversation analysis, however, is that it is noticeable and that it begs the question,

"Why that now?" (Bilmes 1985). Why, having paid a compliment to *B* in his first turn, does *A* pay a second and much stronger compliment in his third turn? The contrast between the two compliments is noticeable and the analyst can account for the second compliment by inferring that *A* decided that his first compliment was not adequate, and therefore undertook to repair the situation.

It is unlikely, though, that a student data collector would arrive at such a conclusion. The student's reliance on intuition and the ethnographic method of data collection would almost certainly result in a simplified recording and a standardized account of the above exchange. She would probably identify *A*'s first utterance as a weak compliment, but the method employed by Manes and Wolfson (1981) does not require their collectors to pay attention to the compliment recipient's response. They are interested primarily in the form of the speech act, not in the interactional work it does. However, in the absence of a criterion for deciding whether a particular utterance is a compliment, and in the absence of any interactional evidence in support of the assignment of a speech act label, the collector's decision would be based on what she already knows, thereby reinforcing the standardized notion of the nature of a compliment.

Furthermore, the ethnographic method of data collection makes the accurate recording of conversational data almost impossible, except in the case of the most standardized exchanges. Any researcher who has attempted to collect data in this fashion and who has compared the results with tape-recorded data knows how great the difference is in terms of the quality and quantity of the data (Cohen 1996:391-395). The difficulty



of listening for data and trying to note it down would also mean that although the student collector in the example above might record both of *A*'s compliments, there is little possibility that she would manage to note the connection between the two. Her attention would be focused on an accurate recording of a small stretch of text, rather than the impossible task of an accurate recording of approximately *sixty-three* seconds of text. The further implications of this important issue will be discussed Chapter 5, Section 6 below.

Manes and Wolfson's (1981) sociolinguistic approach to the study of compliments not only revealed that 'Your hair looks nice' (NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ), 'I love your hair' (I (really) {like/love} NP), and 'This was a really great meal' (PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP) were the types of compliment that were most commonly paid (*ibid.*:120), but also convinced them that compliments are formulaic (*ibid.*:123). A study of naturally occurring data, however, quickly reveals a more diverse and more complex picture, and the next five sections of this chapter will substantiate this claim. They will discuss compliments and indexicality; compliments and lexical phrases; compliments in negative utterances; compliments in extended sequences; and compliments and genre. The chapter will conclude with a review of compliments and preference, and with some observations on the use of compliments in the EFL classroom.

## **5.2 Compliments and indexicality**

Although the student data collectors employed by Manes and Wolfson (1981) did not ask for a definition of a compliment, Holmes (1988b:446) offers her students the following guidance:

A compliment is a speech act which implicitly or explicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ~~good~~ (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.

The previous section attempted to demonstrate, however, that the interactional element is missing from such a definition and that an utterance is not a compliment simply because of an actor's intentions or because the utterance matches a formula. The next five sections will show that complimenting is a much more diverse, complex and interesting activity than the formula, NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ, suggests, and that teachers who restrict their work on compliments to the teaching of the formula risk making 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel 1967:66-70) of their students.

While standardized compliments such as, 'I like your tie,' are readily understandable, many compliments, like most utterances, depend for their effect on a knowledge of the indexical particulars of the compliment, and a note on indexicality will follow the data extract below. The dependence of the meaning of an utterance on contextual information can be seen in the following example, which is taken from an interview on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. A male interviewer (A) is talking to a



British actor (B) called Michael Cashman who has appeared mostly on television, but also in films, and on the stage. His efforts to establish a singing career, however, have failed and he attributes his failure to what he claims is the existence of prejudice against homosexuals in the music industry.

[RS:I:89:24:1]

- 1 B: A record company approached me (.) with a song it was a very nice song  
2 and we recorded it but sadly (.) we didn't release it and that was as  
3 much to do (.) erm with the:: (.) the prejudice from within the music  
4 music industry er about a known gay man (.) releasing a record=  
5 A: =Mmm=  
6 B: =and it was er (.) it was nice song (.) u:::m=  
7 A: =I thought in the pop music industry it was perfectly all right because  
8 there's so many aren't there [like er:] (Bronsky Beat) and who else is is=  
9 B: [Oh yeh]  
10 A: =er::: out and proud er I I [can't think] offhand but there are lo::ts=  
11 B: [Oh yes but] =But  
12 it's the old thing Bill of (.) they became (.) and I don't necessarily mean  
13 them they beca became what I call (.) honorary heterosexuals  
14 beforehand=they became successful (.) then their sexuality wasn't in  
15 question everybody thought oh they're they're heterosexual and then they  
16 came out (.) and er very fewple few people within that industry er make  
17 it by coming out first (.) and that's a lot to do with the::: er the  
18 representation that you get from the:: the:: A&R men who have to watch  
19 their their positions=  
20 A: =And you re::ally think that's why it didn't actually make it to the shops?=  
21 B: =I know why=I I know that is why yes=  
22 A: =Gosh mm=  
23 B: =Yes but I but I'm terribly philosophical about it and I say "Well so what?"  
24 (.) that that doesn't matter erm (.) you know hopefully we'll get to a world  
25 where (.) erm so long as you can sing (.) and it's a good song that's all  
26 that matters=  
27 A: =Well yah boo sucks to them anyway because you've worked with  
28 Elizabeth Taylor=  
29 B: =ABSOLUTELY=  
30 A: =an they aven't=  
31 B: =Y'know she was terribly nice to me ...

This text demonstrates that one way to console someone who is disappointed or who has been unfairly treated is to draw attention to something that counters the disappointment or unfair treatment, and this can be done by complimenting that person on a success or an achievement. It also shows that while compliments are often explicit, they can, in some cases, be implicit, and it was possible for the compliment in this case to be implicit, because indexical knowledge is assumed. On lines 16 and 17, therefore, *A* mentions one of *B*'s achievements when he observes that *B* has worked with Elizabeth Taylor. Subsequent turns reveal that *B* had had a significant role in an American film called "Zee and Co.," which starred Elizabeth Taylor. The claim that 'You've worked with Elizabeth Taylor' is a compliment depends on the indexical knowledge possessed by the audience to this particular programme, and on the response displayed by *B*, the recipient of the compliment. The indexical property of talk is 'the fact that people routinely do not state the intended meaning of the expressions they use. The expressions are vague and equivocal, lending themselves to several meanings. The sense or meaning of these expressions cannot be decided unless a context is supplied' (Leiter 1980:107).

The interview was broadcast on a weekday morning programme to listeners in Hampshire, Dorset, and the Isle of Wight, and, to judge from the type of music played on the programme and the age of those who phone in to the programme, many of those listeners would be old enough to remember Elizabeth Taylor in her heyday. Thus, for many, the name of Elizabeth Taylor would index fame, wealth, glamour, success, talent, and beauty, among other things, and the information that the actor had worked with Elizabeth Taylor would imply that the man himself must surely



possess some exceptional qualities. Furthermore, invoking the name of a famous and glamorous actress introduces a contrast between domestic failure and international success, and between not having a record released by an unnamed (British) company and appearing in a Hollywood film seen by many millions of people. An assessment of this sort, therefore, implies that *B* is a talented person who is likely to be admired by his peers. It suggests, too, something of the interactional complexity of complimenting that was referred to at the end of the preceding section.

An interesting aspect of the compliment is that it is produced in such a way that *B* can respond to it without difficulty. Pomerantz (1978) notes that there are preferences in English for agreeing with compliments, but also for avoiding self-praise, and with a compliment such as, 'You've worked with Elizabeth Taylor,' *B* is able to display agreement, while at the same time avoiding any suggestion of vanity. He can do so because it is a statement of fact, but a statement that depends for its meaning and its effect on the indexical knowledge of the audience. While it might be difficult for a person to respond easily to utterance such as 'You're an exceptional person,' it is easy him to respond to 'You've worked with Elizabeth Taylor.'

A very similar compliment occurs in the next data extract, which is taken from a recording of an interview on a television programme which was broadcast to South-east Asia on the World Service of the BBC. A male interviewer (*A*) is talking to Sir Peter Hall (*B*).

[WSTV:l:97:80:1]

- A: In the fifties and sixties when when (0.5) the work did start coming in you you were almost part of a magic circle weren't you=Pinter O'Toole Peggy Ashcroft Maggie Smith (.) did you feel like a pioneer? What was it like in the London of those days?
- B: I think that erm the interesting thing wh ( ) the big dream I had was (.) to form a company (.) of actors a classical company which to that extent hadn't been done before (.) erm Gielgud had done it a little bit before the war ...

For an educated, middle-aged, middle-class British employee of the BBC, such as the interviewer, the name of Peter Hall evokes memories of the success, excitement, and glamour of the British theatre in the nineteen-sixties. The interviewer mentions a few of Sir Peter Hall's collaborators from those years, but he could have added many more names of fashionable and famous people whose company the director enjoyed. The use of the phrase 'a magic circle' and the recitation of the names begins to index the extent of Sir Peter's achievement, but the listener can only wonder how many of the programme's viewers in South-east Asia were able to index enough of the same information in order to recognize that the content of A's turn was complimentary.

Although a compliment framed in the above fashion allows the person being complimented to accept it without appearing immodest, some individuals nevertheless do feel the need to reject compliments. An example of a person doing so comes from a recording of an interview that was broadcast on a national radio station in the United Kingdom. A female interviewer (A) is talking to the American writer and broadcaster, Garrison Keillor (B).



[RF:I:92:53:1]

- A: What what happened as I understand it=as a result of of (.) that and and certainly the monologue became INCREDIBLY popular=what you achieved is (.) something phenomenal as I understand it in American radio which is (.) normally all local=you became a national radio hero
- B: No:: I I I (.) stayed around for lo::ng enough to (.) attract an audience (.) in my country (.) no matter what you do (.) if you did a radio show (.) that consisted of (.) thirty minutes (.) of room noise (.) of silence (.) it would take time (.) but gradually (.) among the great vast American listening public (.) people who really (.) loved the idea of listening to silence from another place (.) would attach themselves to the show (.) and you would have an audience=
- A: =Yes but come on [you didn't]
- B: [I have an] audience for what I do=
- A: =Yes but (.) through some two hundred and sixty or more I think local radio stations the thing is kind of beamed around the States
- B: Yes it's beamed around the States but erm (.) but er [so:: so:: are so are a lot of other things]
- A: [I'm I'm trying to pay you I'm trying to pay you] a compliment but I'm I'm failing [as you predicted]
- B: [professional wrest]ling is beamed around the States=
- A: =((laughs))=
- B: =and roller derbies and er::=
- A: =((laughs)) let's talk about ...

Garrison Keillor had informed the interviewer that he had been born into a community of Plymouth Brethren in rural Minnesota and that his relatives never complimented children because they believed such words would 'corrupt them' and 'turn their heads.' Hence, he predicted that he would resist any compliment that the interviewer attempted to pay him. The transcript shows that A does attempt to pay Garrison Keillor a compliment, but it is one that is implicit in a description of Keillor's achievements, and A counters any doubts about the accuracy of this claim by saying explicitly, 'I'm trying to pay you a compliment.' Her statement is important, because it is evidence that descriptive terms, such as 'the thing is kind of beamed around the States,' can indeed be intended to be complimentary, as our indexical knowledge tells us that they

can.

Despite the resistance of Garrison Keillor, one way of complimenting an individual is to mention something of which the person is likely to be proud. Another way in which compliments are paid is to compare the individual with someone who is successful or talented or famous, by saying 'You're like X.' This is a somewhat less certain way of complimenting an individual, because the comparison may not be understood by the recipient or it may not satisfy that person. In the data extract below, a male interviewer (A) on a national radio programme in the United Kingdom is talking to the American singer, K.D. Lang (B), about a new record that she has produced and he makes two comparisons.

[R5:I:97:65:1]

- A: There there's one very Andrews Sisterish (.) track=  
B: =Smoke Dreams smoke dreams yeh (.) ((laughs)) thank you oh oh  
maybe you're thinking Smoke Ri:::ngs=  
A: =Smoke Rings=  
B: =Smoke Rings yeh Les (Poll) and Mary Ford which was one of the songs  
that initiated the whole concept ...

It seems surprising, perhaps, that the interviewer should compare the style of a contemporary singer with that of a singing group of the nineteen-forties and -fifties. Although the Andrews Sisters may have performed before K.D. Lang was born, she nevertheless suggests that she recognizes the reference, although the identification of the song requires two attempts. As laughter follows the comparison and as B's 'thank you' has an ironic ring, it can be argued that B does not clearly display her



understanding of A's comparison, or of whether her response is preferred or dispreferred. Uncertainty of this sort inevitably has its interactional effects, as the second extract shows.

[R5:l:97:65:1]

- A: Lovely arrangements on the album though erm:: (0.5) there's something (0.5) that I hadn't really spotted before in you that comes out on this album there's something Karen Carpenterish about your voice on this album=is that deliberate?
- B: No:: it's not deliberate but I have heard that comparison before erm (1.0) I I guess it would be:: you know the to::ne of my voice and maybe the vibrato but (.) you know I take it as a big compliment because I'm a huge Karen Carpenter fan=
- A: =Well that's nice *phew* ((laughs)) I thought you might be worried about it=
- B: =No no=
- A: =I think she's a fantastic voice Karen Carpenter=
- B: =Yeh (it) is yeh=
- A: =Yeh but it's something that I really hadn't noticed on the earlier album so much it just seems to come across more this time ...

In this second extract, which begins approximately seventy-five seconds after the end of the preceding extract, A compares B's voice to that of Karen Carpenter, a singer who was much closer in age to B than the Andrews Sisters and with whose voice A might expect B to be familiar. When B observes that the comparison has been made before and reveals that she regards it as highly complimentary, A expresses his relief at B's production of a preferred response. His reaction, however, is noticeable and accountable and is possibly connected with the indeterminate response of B to his earlier comparison, and to his fear that B's response was a dispreferred one. Thus, we can see once again that the achievement of a successful compliment requires indexical knowledge and attention to the sequential development of the interaction,

because some comparisons will be accepted and appreciated and others will not be.

Another interesting way of paying a compliment is to describe the actions of an individual and to allow that person and the overhearing audience to infer the qualities that imbue the action. The act of inferencing requires indexical knowledge and this will be illustrated by two short extracts, the first of which comes from a radio interview with Roger Cooper, a British businessman and journalist who spent five years in an Iranian prison after being convicted of spying for the British government. In the extract below, *A* is a male interviewer and *B* is Roger Cooper. *A* is referring to *B*'s return to Britain after being released from prison.

[RT:I:94:60:2]

- A: The second of April, 1991, five years, three months, twenty-five days of imprisonment=  
B: =Well catalogued=  
A: =Then you were released a (.) came to Heathrow and we'll never forget you Roger for that quote one of the great quotes of our time when you told all those astonished reporters (.) at London Airport, "Anyone who's bin to an English public school (.) served in the ranks of the British Army is perfectly at home in a Third World prison"=  
B: =((laughs))=  
A: =and all of us ((laughs)) who had done either of those things knew exactly what you meant=but it occurred to me Roger that ...

Not only did Roger Cooper spend five dangerous years in prison in Iran, but he also spent part of that time living under a death sentence and he was the victim of a mock execution. Reports at the time of his return to Britain spoke of his courage in adversity and recounted the story of his sentencing. It was reported that the court had sentenced Cooper to 'death plus ten years,' and Cooper is alleged to have replied,



'Not necessarily in that order, I hope.' Hence, the interviewer's recollection above suggests that his comments indexed bravery, wit, *sang froid*, intelligence, stoicism, and other qualities. This ability to display courage in the face of great danger is certainly one that has been celebrated in British history and in the history of other cultures. Shakespeare has a character in *King John* say that 'courage mounteth with occasion,' and Francis Bacon wrote that, 'prosperity doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue.' Hence, the attribution of such a quality to an individual would be recognized by many as a highly complimentary action. However, for someone who does not subscribe to such values, Roger Cooper's utterance might be interpreted perhaps as foolish or vain.

The second extract comes from an interview with a professional golfer and the recording is taken from a sports programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. At the time of the recording, the golfer had been one of the leading money winners on the European circuit for many years. This example also involves the audience's applying indexical knowledge in order to infer the existence of an admired quality, but that knowledge is applied to the golfer's response rather than to the interviewer's assessment. In this extract, *A* is the interviewer and *B* is the golfer.

[RS:l:89:29:1]

A: Do you (.) like this course? =

B: =Oh yes I enjoy coming here = I think um we get great crowds here and we know lots of people and everybody is really friendly and it's a it's really nice tournament to play in =

A: =So it makes you respond and you responded very well today = I see that in fact you had six birdies in (.)cluding a run of three shots under par at holes 5, 6 and 7 = Any give you particular satisfaction?

B: Um well I didn't realize I'd had so many birdies actually. I was just trying

to keep it on the fairway and on the green ((laughs)) but I did I did hit it hit it in pretty close (.) those three holes and managed to er put in a few putts and I just I just kept going=I had a bogey and I got annoyed and that's when I had three birdies in a row=

A: =That was the bogey at the ...

In his second turn, the interviewer compliments the golfer on an excellent performance and it requires relatively little indexical knowledge on the part of the average sports fan to recognize that six birdies represents a good performance. B's response, however, is noticeable and accountable in this transcript. It is surprising that a professional golfer, who is obliged to complete a scorecard and who is playing for money and for a place on the European order of merit, should claim to be unaware of the number of birdies in the round, particularly when three of them were consecutive. This response contrasts markedly with those reported in Emmison (1987). He recorded interviews with eminent sportsmen and studied the responses that they made to accounts of their achievements. Many of those sportsmen attributed their success to luck, circumstances, their team mates, or other factors, but the cricketers, for example, that he recorded do not appear to have forgotten the number of sixes they have hit and the bowlers have not forgotten the number the number of wickets they have taken.

Although B's claim not to know the number of birdies in the round is noticeable and accountable to the reader of the above transcript, it is not noticeable from the point of view of the interviewer and it is not treated as an example of irony or false modesty. Instead, it is treated as an unmarked and preferred response and it is treated as such because it comes from a woman (Tannen 1993, 1995). The golfer's name is Cathy Panton and she enjoyed considerable success on the European women's circuit during



the nineteen-seventies and -eighties. Hence, while it would be noticeable if a leading male player claimed not to know how many birdies he had made and if he suggested that he was merely trying to keep the ball 'on the fairway and on the green,' the indexical circumstances of the utterance not only made it acceptable from a woman, but also made it a preferred action. The audience infers from her response that no matter how successful she is, she remains admirably modest about her achievements. It is also worth noting that the recording was made in 1989 and that the past decade has seen very noticeable changes in the preferred and dispreferred responses to compliments that are paid to sportsmen and women. In some sports, a considerable lack of self-restraint and modesty appears to be the preferred response, but both qualities still seem to be valued in sports such as golf and cricket.

A final example of a compliment depending on the indexical circumstances for its understanding comes from a recording of a programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. It is an item of local interest that appeared on a sports programme and, as the interviewer assumes that his listeners would be familiar with the story, he expects them to be capable of indexing the relevant information. The male interviewer (A) is talking to the Southampton and England footballer, Matthew Le Tissier (B).

[RS:I:97:66:2]

- A: I think everybody was pleased about the contract last week. Er:: didn't take you long (.) to sort things out really did it=  
 B: =Erm:: no erm (.) I I've always said that I'm (.) that I'm more than happy here and (.) playin in playin in one of the best (.) best leagues in the world so er:: it's not a problem for me to sign again=  
 A: =Didn't take too much thought obviously (.) despite what's happened over the summer  
 B: Erm:: I mean er (.) managers come and go erm it's part and parcel of

the game ...

A listener uninterested in sport would be able to infer, from *B*'s first turn, what "everybody was pleased about." However, it requires indexical knowledge to appreciate the importance of Matthew Le Tissier to Southampton Football Club and the significance of his signing a new contract, and thereby to recognize the size of the compliment implicit in *A*'s understated first utterance. Le Tissier's popularity in the city is enormous, regardless of how he plays or how he behaves in his private life. Hence, both fans and local residents are not merely 'pleased', but hugely relieved that their hero is still amongst them.

The compliment paid to Matthew Le Tissier serves to remind us that it requires indexical knowledge not only to determine what a compliment is, but also to recognize the strength of the compliment. Compliments among friends, relations, or colleagues, or in particular groups of people take forms and employ expressions that are recognized within the small group, but which may not seem remotely complimentary to outsiders. The language used in single-sex or relatively closed communities, such as groups of military personnel, school children or students, or athletes, would no doubt provide examples of compliments that would strike more open communities as peculiar, as Murray's (1985) work on the inventive language of singles' bars suggests. However, ethnomethodologists believe that language must be examined according to its local situation and its local constitution, and that rather than saying that a compliment is an utterance that has the form 'NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ in 53.6 per cent of all instances, we should consider the meaning of an utterance in its context and the way that it is responded to. This understanding of the role of indexicality in the



study of conversation is one way in which ethnomethodology is of considerable value to the student and teacher of EFL, and in which it can counter the simplicities of 'NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ.'

### ***5.3 Compliments in natural chunks of language***

In recent years, EFL teaching has been enriched by works which have identified the existence, form and function of prefabricated units of language and which have suggested how they might be taught (Coulmas 1981; DeCarrico and Nattinger 1988; Henry 1995, 1996; Lewis 1993; Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), in particular, argue that the lexical phrase is an ideal unit for exploitation in language teaching and they describe the formal and functional aspects of lexical phrases before suggesting how they might be used by the EFL teacher. This section, however, will claim that while the long-term effect of their work is likely to be beneficial for the study of compliments and other features of spoken interaction, the short-term effect is more likely to be that the argument that complimenting is a formulaic and unimaginative activity will be reinforced. There are three reasons why this is so and they will be described briefly below. The remainder of the section will offer examples of the sorts of discoveries that Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) readers might make if they were to adopt a conversation analytic approach to the collection of data rather than the approach described by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992).

In the past decade, computer analysis of language has become a reality for many researchers in applied linguistics and EFL. Not only is access to huge databases becoming increasingly easy, but scanning machines allow researchers to establish their own specialised databases (Sinclair 1991). Researchers can scan the established databases for collocations of various kinds and Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:22) believe, along with many others, that a large 'span' or 'window' of words 'can reveal important and pervasive co-occurrence relationships that, but for the wide eye of the computer, are otherwise too discontinuous to be noticed.'

Although a computer program can indeed scan a large database on behalf of the researcher, the latter needs to tell the former what to look for, and there is a danger that the individual at the keyboard will act rather like Manes and Wolfson's (1981:127) naive student researcher who does not need to be told what a compliment is. Intuition may inform both types of researcher that a compliment is 'a speech act which implicitly or explicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker ... for some good ... which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer' (Holmes 1988b:446), and, if the computer-aided researcher is a middle-class American, she may search for collocations with one of the five semantically positive adjectives or one of the two semantically positive verbs. Other lexical phrases than 'NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ' might well be explored, but the state of current research into complimenting and the nature of the technology would tempt the researcher to look for what she knows to exist.

Manes and Wolfson (1981:120) claimed that, in a sample of 686 compliments, three



syntactic patterns described 85% of their data and that claim has made a noticeable impression on their fellow researchers in sociolinguistics. Access to databases of transcribed speech, however, now gives other sociolinguists the opportunity to apply the same methodology to a huge corpus and to produce results that greatly reinforce what is already a formidable position in the literature. Consequently, instead of reading that three syntactic patterns describe 85% of 686 compliments, one might in due course read that three patterns describe 85% of thousands of compliments. This is the first of the short-term effects that can be foreseen in Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) work.

The fact that a computer-based corpus can be used to produce considerably more examples of the same sort is perhaps something that a reader might infer from Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), whereas the second effect is explicit in their work. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) is an argument for the importance and usefulness of lexical phrases rather than an account of original research into the form and function of lexical phrases, and, as a consequence, for their purposes of illustration they rely to a large extent on data collected by others or on invented data. For compliments, they rely on Manes and Wolfson (1981) and they inform their readers that 'the linguistic forms used for expressing compliments in US middle-class adult society appear to be extremely limited' (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992:87). This ready acceptance of the claims of Manes and Wolfson (1981) seems surprising from researchers who are arguing that the use of lexical phrases has been overlooked. A more useful response would be to accept the existing research into compliments, but to challenge readers to ask what further part lexical phrases might play in this activity

and how they might extend our understanding of complimenting.

The third effect that one might see in Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) is the most important, and that is the possibility that this work will simply reinforce the idea that compliments are utterances that are just waiting to be plucked effortlessly from conversations, rather than that compliments are complex interactional achievements. At worst, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) might encourage the emphasis in this study to be placed even more heavily on the collection of corpora, and on the classification of data, to the extent that the need to justify the results of this data collection in interactional terms is overlooked.

Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) cautious and somewhat demotivating description of compliments is repeated in their examples of conversational data. They provide no information about the source of the data they use and there is no description of the context in which they occur. Furthermore, their conversational extracts are simplified and they read rather like conversations based on role playing (Willis 1995). One consequence of studying Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) data is to recall Moerman's (1988:13) words,

Made up or remembered instances can come only from what we already assume, know, or think we know. They cannot surprise us or reveal anything new.

While it may be unfair to criticize Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) for failing to provide empirical data in support of their theoretical proposals, there is nevertheless something



incongruous about illustrating a stimulating idea with data that are anything but stimulating. As Willis (1995:90) says in a review of this work, 'If language is to be analysed, why not analyse real language rather than reconstructed language?' In defence of Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), it might be argued that a particular lexical expression can occur very infrequently even in a database containing many millions of words, as Carter and McCarthy (1995:143) note with regard to the occurrence of 'It's all in a day's work.' However, while that may be true of finding a particular lexical phrase, there is little doubt that even a small database of naturally-occurring talk will provide examples of some of the many lexical phrases that can be used as compliments. Such examples are generally more varied and therefore more interesting for the EFL student than the formulaic examples that are familiar from the literature.

The remainder of this section will provide examples of lexical phrases which have the 'illocutionary force potential,' as Flowerdew (1990:86) says, of compliments. The examples will not each be accompanied by separate justifications for describing them as compliments, because that would make for very repetitive reading. Instead Section 5.7 will consider the subject of compliments and preference organization, and it will summarize the conversation analytic approach to the study of compliments. The examples presented and discussed in this section will follow Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) categorization of lexical phrases into polywords, institutionalized expressions, phrasal constraints, and sentence builders, and it will illustrate them.

Polywords, short phrases which function very much like individual lexical items, form the first of Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) four categories. An example might be the

phrase 'not a bad idea,' as used in the following extract from a phone-in programme on a national radio station in the United Kingdom. A male presenter (*A*) is talking to a male caller (*B*) about ways of curbing vandalism and hooliganism.

[TR:PI:95:48:1]

- B: ... people should be died (.) a g g you know maybe a green their their faces green or purple or pink or something like that an indelible dye that washed off after a number of months
- A: Not a bad idea that and there there was a judge I spoke to the other day on the radio ...

*A* listens to *B*'s suggestion, evaluates it positively, and uses the polyword 'Not a bad idea' to compliment him. In a second example, an adult male speaker uses the polyword 'Good boy' to compliment another adult male for refraining from an action of which the former disapproves. *A* is a male talk show presenter on a local radio station in the United Kingdom and *B* is a male caller who shares *A*'s interest in spiders.

[CR:PI:96:N9:1]

- A: I feed mine on crickets what about mice?
- B: N no
- A: When they get bigger?=  
B: =I wouldn't no I wouldn't feed it live (.) not (.) not small animals=  
A: =You wouldn't feed it live but you'd feed it insects=  
B: =Yeh I'd feed it em [but]  
A: [But] you wouldn't feed em with a little mouse=  
B: =No I wouldn't no=  
A: =Good boy

*A* keeps large spiders as pets, but disapproves of the practice of feeding them on live animals such as mice. When he learns that *B* shares his views about what is



appropriate food for a spider, *A* compliments *B* on the standards he maintains by using the polyword, 'Good boy.'

Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) second category of lexical phrases is institutionalized expressions and these are phrases of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances. An example of an institutionalized expression used as a compliment appears in the following extract from a recording of a phone-in programme on a Malaysian national radio station. A male caller (*B*) is talking to the male programme presenter (*A*) about problems he has with his wife and he concludes the reference to his wife with a compliment.

[MR:PI:96:N23:1]

- B: An ah::: (.) the other half expects me to also entertain her (.) like er when she say oh look I'm very lonely you know (.) why don't you (.) er::: come back (then) sometimes and take me off for lunch which is not very possible
- A: Ah::: I see yeh yeh=
- B: =Yah but at a same I mean ah ah (.) well (.) frankly I can't live without her=
- A: =Mm hmm

This variation on the institutionalized compliment or cliché, 'I can't live without you,' is directed at someone who is not present, and this is almost inevitably so because it would probably be impossible to record such a compliment being delivered to the intended recipient.

Another institutionalized lexical phrase functioning as a compliment occurs in an extract from a recording of a phone-in programme on a local radio station in the United

Kingdom. The male programme presenter (A) has returned to work after a period of illness and he is talking to a female caller (B).

[CR:PI:96:89:2]

B: I missed you Peter=  
A: =Yeh I missed me too

As the presenter is unable to reciprocate the compliment, he replies with a joke. A slightly more elaborate form of the same compliment occurs in the next example. This, too, involves a female caller (B) to a phone-in programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom telling a male presenter (A) that she has missed him, though for a different reason.

[CR:PI:96:55:1]

B: I used to listen to you when you were on Talk Radio=  
A: =Yes=  
B: =and I rang you in=  
A: =Yeah  
B: an I had a chat with you=  
A: =Ye:::s=  
B: =I lost you completely and last night I was muckin through the radio=  
A: =Uh huh  
B: with the channels (.) and didn't I find Caesar the Geezer ? An I was so:::  
happy that I've been trying to get through to you since ten o'clock=  
A: =God [bless you darlin]  
B: [an I'm a first time] caller=  
A: =D'you know I've been here for six months  
B: I kno::w I missed you so::: much=  
A: =Oh bless your heart=  
B: =and I'm so happy that I'm back on to your station again  
A: Thank you very much indeed I'm so pleased you're there

Another female caller (B) to the same male presenter (A) employs a different



institutionalized expression as a compliment:

[CR:PI:96:68:1]

- A: Line number one hello=  
B: =Hello is that Caesar?=  
A: =It is good evening=  
B: =Hiya Caesar=  
A: =Hi=  
B: =You have just made my day=  
A: =Why?

The caller uses the lexical phrase 'You've made my day' because she, too, had been a fan of the particular presenter when he worked for a different radio station. She has tuned in to his programme by chance and she pays him a compliment by suggesting how important he is to her.

In contrast to these extracts from talk radio, a recording of a family discussion provides an example of an elderly woman (A) talking to a younger female relative (B) about some of the latter's engagement party photographs.

[FF:C:96:74:1]

- A: I've been going through these again I think they're so lovely (0.5) all of them=  
B: =Hmm (.) but the developing was a bit disappointing=look at the colour=  
A: =Ye:::s they don't do you justice

A pays B a strong formulaic compliment in her first turn, which B attempts to downgrade in her response. A then strongly upgrades her compliment by using the institutionalized lexical phrase, 'X doesn't do you justice.'

A final example of an institutionalized lexical phrase used as a compliment comes from interview on a programme broadcast on a national radio station in the United Kingdom. A male interviewer (A) is talking to a female writer (B) about the British royal family, and about the marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

[RT:I:94:N7:1]

- B: ... the fact of matter is the proof of the pudding is in the eating=everything I have ever written has turned out to be true=  
A: =You revealed the bulimia and you revealed the marriage wasn't happy [an there was trouble]  
B: [And I revealed] the fact that she that she wanted a separation and I said if she gets a separation she's gonna get it after December 1992 which she did (0.5) er:: (.) you know so I stand by my record=  
A: =There you are that's quite a track record=Ellen we'll have some music while we think about that that's quite a track record I must agree with that yeh

The interviewer recounts B's achievements as a chronicler of the lives of members of the British royal family in his first turn, and reinforces the complimentary effect of the list of achievements in his second turn by announcing that she has 'quite a track record.' The use of this institutionalized lexical phrase echoes B's own lexical phrase, 'I stand by my record.'

Nattinger and DeCarrico's (1992) third category is phrasal constraints. These are short to medium length phrases which allow variation of lexical and phrasal categories. In the following extract from a family discussion, a son (A) is thanking his mother (B) for her help in arranging a wedding, because the help she had given had been very considerable.



[FF:C:97:76:1]

- A: Mum if it hadn't been for you phoning the::: ah::: (1.5) Registry Office I don't know what I would have done probably nothing until July=  
B: =Well you wouldn't have known you wouldn't have known ( ) would you? You haven't the time (1.5) and then it might have been (.) bit too late=  
A: =Yeh=  
B: =Anyway ...

The phrasal constraint, 'If it hadn't been for you, I don't know what I would have done,' permits variation in its form, particularly in the second clause. In this context, A's use of the phrase indexes, among other things, the concern the mother has displayed for her son, and her energy and resourcefulness.

A similar example is taken from another family conversation. A female relative (A) is thanking a male relative (B) for some financial help which he had given her many years earlier and, in doing so, she uses a phrasal constraint to compliment him.

[FF:C:96:82:2]

- A: And I've got (.) about erm (.) of my own money=  
B: =Ah::: don't it's=  
A: =I just want=  
B: =You don't have to tell me=  
A: =No::: all due to you=  
B: =No Meg=  
A: =Do you know=  
B: =Don't don't (.) talk about this I'm not interested in money=  
A: =I want=  
B: =I mean (.) not like that=  
A: =I know but I just want you to know how nice I feel=  
B: =No=  
A: =through you

In this conversation, *A* foresees that *B* is about to thank him and compliment him and he attempts to stop her. However, she uses the phrasal constraint, 'It's all due to you,' which is related to phrases such as '(It's all) thanks to you ...,' 'But for you ...,' and the preceding example, 'If it hadn't been for you ...'. It might be argued that such expressions are potentially more complimentary than a formulaic utterance such as 'What you did was very nice,' because they allow the hearer to index many more qualities or attributes than 'niceness.'

The final example of a phrasal constraint is only an approximate one, because it was overheard and noted down rather than recorded. The 1997 Hungarian motor racing Grand Prix was broadcast to South-east Asia via the Star satellite TV broadcasting system and viewers heard a commentary from the British motor racing broadcaster, Murray Walker. On the second or third lap of the race, Damon Hill overtook Michael Schumacher on a bend and the skill and boldness of Hill's driving caused Murray Walker to say something like, 'It takes a lot of nerve to try a manoeuvre like that.' The phrasal constraint that was used to compliment Damon Hill has the familiar yet variable formula, 'It takes (an) X to do Y,' which can be applied to many individuals and many actions, and to discreditable actions or individuals as well as creditable ones. The possibility that a lexical phrase can be used either as a compliment or a complaint is, of course, a weakness of any approach that collects decontextualized utterances and ignores the interactional effects of a sequence of utterances.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this brief account of the use of lexical phrases as compliments. The first is that there is really no substitute for listening to recordings of



naturally-occurring talk if interesting and varied data are to be found. A computer based corpus is a valuable addition, particularly as a means of checking the frequency of occurrence of patterns detected in the spoken data. However, if such a corpus is a teacher or student's principal research base for a study of compliments, as Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) seem to suggest it might be, then the results of the data analysis should perhaps be treated with caution.

The second conclusion is that the study of naturally-occurring talk is almost certain to produce lexical phrases that are more appealing to the EFL learner than formulaic compliments such as, 'Your hair looks nice.' When presented with such versatile forms as, for example, 'It takes a lot of thought to do something like that,' or 'If it hadn't been for you, I don't know what ... ,' the learner would have the motivation to listen to recordings of talk and to detect other forms that could be used as compliments. The learner would also recognize that it is necessary to justify the claim that a particular utterance is a compliment by looking at its interactional environment, rather than simply to say that because an utterance has a certain form it is a compliment.

## 5.4 Compliments in negative utterances

One of the more surprising things about the work of Manes and Wolfson (1981) and their many followers is that they have employed large numbers of data collectors, yet these numerous auditors seem not to have collected a statistically significant number of compliments that occur in the following form:

[RT:PI:95:N7:2]

- A: Now you've only been married forty-seven years Ron=I bet you've never  
had a cross word have you  
B: Well occasionally but er:: nothing serious=  
A: =Good=  
B: =No=  
A: =Deligh[ted] to hear it  
B: [No:]

The above extract is taken from a recording of a phone-in programme on a national radio station in the United Kingdom. *A* is a female presenter and *B* is a male caller who has phoned in to take part in a competition. *A* compliments *B* not by reporting what he has done at some point in his life, but by suggesting what he has not done. She does not say that she bets that *B* has been a kind, loving, or considerate husband, but instead she allows her listeners to infer the nature of *B*'s contribution to an enduring relationship by suggesting that he has never argued with his wife. Even though *A* is talking to a stranger and delivering a jocular compliment, the form of the compliment is easily recognizable. Actors do indeed compliment one another by mentioning what the other has not done or has never done, and by assuming that appropriate inferences will be made about the character of a person who never thinks



about herself, or never bears a grudge, or never complains, or never forgets to put the cap back on the toothpaste. Manes and Wolfson (1981:120-121), however, provide a list of all of the patterns that comprise one per cent or more of their data, but they have no such pattern as 'NP never VP' or 'NP {is} no NP.' Their smallest pattern, in fact, does employ a negative, but it is in the form, 'Isn't NP ADJ?' or 'Isn't your ring pretty?' It seems surprising, therefore, that in their collection of 686 compliments, they do not have as many as *seven* examples of utterances such as, 'You're no quitter' or 'She never makes a fuss.'

In contrast to the work of Manes and Wolfson (1981), this section will argue that individuals are commonly complimented with the use of utterances that employ negatives to describe a person's achievements or character. Thus, rather than tell someone that she is a good driver, the speaker might choose to say that she has never had an accident in her life and expect others to infer that she is a good driver, rather than a lucky driver or a very occasional driver. Similarly, diligent or loyal employees are complimented on never having been late or never having missed a day's work. Earlier sections of this chapter have provided examples of compliments in a negative formulation, including 'I can't live without her,' and 'You wouldn't feed it with a little mouse.' Most of all, the familiarity of this form of compliment is epitomized by the commonplace British assessment, 'Not bad,' and 'not a bad idea' was one of the compliments used in the preceding section.

In one of the examples taken from the data collected for this thesis, a male caller (B) to a phone-in programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom compliments

the male programme presenter (A) on his honesty by noting something that the latter never does.

[CR:PI:96:70:2]

B: I listen to you (.) an all I'd just like to say really is well done for what you've done tonight anyway but the advice you do give out you never say oh you're a legal person or anything like that at all=

A: =That's right I always say I'm not

B: Exactly=

A: =that I'm not a qualified er:::: (0.5) er:: lawyer or doctor or anything like that I'm not qualified in any way shape or form

A gives advice to his listeners, but in doing so he presents himself as someone who has common sense, a certain knowledge, and experience of life, and not as a person with any kind of professional training. B recognizes this honesty and lack of pretension and he compliments A on the standards he maintains. The compliment, however, is phrased as, 'You never say X,' rather than as 'You're an honest man.'

In the next extract, a female studio guest (B) on a programme on a national radio station in the United Kingdom is talking to a male programme presenter (A). B married into the British aristocracy and she is talking about her former husband and about her father.

[RT:I:94:4:1]

B: My ex-husband used to say to me he used to say (.) er and I thought it was the drink and the drugs speaking=now I can see it was just the truth=he used to say the only reason why I married you was that you had a reputation for being beautiful AND your father has a lot of money (.) he used to say=



- A: = [Did he get] did he get his hands on it? =  
 B: = [I'm ( )] = My father is a fool and  
 [my father] sorry my father's not a fool and a fool and his money are =  
 A: [((laughs))]  
 B: = quickly parted and my father in that respect was a veritable ge::nius

In describing her father's understanding of human nature and of money, she does not immediately say that he is astute or perceptive or prudent, but instead uses a variation of the familiar compliment, 'He's no fool.'

A particularly nice example of a compliment which is both a lexical phrase and an utterance employing a negative comes from an Australian male commentator who was describing a rugby international between Australia and South Africa. The Australian captain, John Eales, was having an especially good game and his performance prompted the commentator to exclaim, 'Is there nothing John Eales can't do?'

Negatives can also be used to compliment individuals for having induced a change of perception, so that the individual says, for example, that she never understood something until the other person explained it, and two examples follow of such a change being described. In the first, one male lecturer (A) tells another (B) about a group of students who had not learnt in secondary school how to structure either an essay or an oral presentation. A compliment in the form, 'I never understood X until now,' is, of course, one that most teachers are happy to hear.

[C:C:97:N1:2]

- A: ... and they said (0.5) at the end of it they said they never taught us this at school we always used to jumble stuff =

- B: =Jumble stuff?
- A: We::ll they said (0.5) when they got their information at school when they made a speech or an essay=
- B: =Yeh=
- A: =it was all jumbled they just put down anything in their heads (.) you know they just wrote it down (.) they didn't know to present put [it in ( )]
- B: [Oh I I beg your I beg your pardon I] I see what you mean
- A: Yeh:: (.) cos the fact is well they're they're probably doing stuff ( ) you know er using the topic and they said oh:: we didn't know this before and I was really pleased ...

The students inform the lecturer that their previous teachers 'never taught us' what he has taught them, and their comment and their performance in class indicate a change in the state of their knowledge. They do not tell the lecturer that he has taught them well, but rather that they now know something that they did not know before.

The second example of an individual attributing a positive change in perception to another comes in an interview with the American singer, K.D. Lang. The male interviewer (A) refers to one of K.D. Lang's (B) songs.

[R5:l:97:65:1]

- A: Yeh yeh ah y you do it beautifully I've gotta say you also do er the er the other track on the album the album that I love is "the air that you breathe" which is a song that I never ever liked=
- B: =Uh huh=
- A: =till I heard you singing it=
- B: =Well thank you I I've always been attracted to that song but as I said today (.) I took the sort of the anthemic quality out of it ...

There is something deceptive and amusing about a compliment which begins 'I never



liked X' and concludes 'until you did it.' Although A begins by saying that he loves a particular song, his turn ends with a seeming contradiction, which B acknowledges in a neutral fashion. When A adds that his perception of the song was changed from 'never ever liking' to 'loving,' B recognizes the compliment and thanks A.

Sacks (1992a:37) talks about actors reflecting on their lives and saying things such as, 'That was before I met you and I was lonely then,' and his comment serves as a reminder that romantic entanglements are occasions when perceptions change and when actors say such things as 'I was never really happy until I met you' or 'I never enjoyed going to X until I met you.' The compliment is implicit in the description of the change that has been wrought. The interviewer (A) in the extract above, however, illustrates the potential for witty exploitation in compliments of this sort.

Although Manes and Wolfson (1981) and the researchers whom they have influenced appear not to record compliments that can have a negative form, Pomerantz (1984) does discuss such compliments, and they are compliments that follow self-deprecations. She says that

disagreements with prior self-deprecations very frequently include evaluative terms. Such terms are contrastively classed relative to the prior self-deprecatory formulations; they are favorable, complimentary evaluative terms (*Ibid.*:85).

Most of her examples do employ favourable, complimentary evaluative terms, as in the following example:

- A: I mean I feel good when I'm playing with her because I feel like uh her  
and I play alike hehh  
B: No. You play beautifully.  
(*ibid.*)

In a smaller number of examples, however, the second speaker simply rejects the content of the self-deprecation, but without employing favourable, complimentary evaluative terms, as in the extract below.

- L: ... I'm so dumb I don't even know it. hhh!  
- heh!  
W: Y-no, y-you're not dumb, ...  
(*ibid.*:87)

The second speaker rejects the first speaker's self-deprecation, but simply by saying that it is not true. In the absence of the co-text and of the indexical particulars of the utterance, a variety of inferences might be drawn concerning *W*'s estimation of *L*'s understanding or ability. Nevertheless, a compliment might have been implicit in *W*'s utterance, and the remainder of this section will provide examples of responses to self-deprecations which permit more confident inferences.

The first example is taken from a recording of a discussion on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. *A* is a male programme presenter and *B* and *C* are male studio guests who are answering questions from callers about 'do-it-yourself' matters. They have been giving advice about the problem of squeaking stairs and *A* addresses a caller at the conclusion of the exchange.



[RS:I:89:17:2]

- A: Well done Margaret=I've got the same problem with the landing (.)th  
my chipboard and he's given me the same advice=  
B: =And when you come home late after a night out with the boys it wakens  
your [wife up and] she knows what time you got home=  
A: [It does indeed] =I always get  
to the top of the stairs very quietly and then fall down=  
B: =(((laughs)))=  
C: =(((laughs)))=  
A: =[Right it's er Sally Pritchard from er (Hawkley)=I don't really honestly]=  
B: =((( laughs )))=  
C: =((( laughs )))=  
C: =I know you don't=  
A: =No [I'm ( )]  
B: [No no you're] you're not that sort of man=  
A: =I mustn't blacken my own character=  
B/C: =((laughs))=  
A: =Sally Pritchard from (Hawkley)

A jokingly suggests that he sometimes arrives home late and not very sober, and *B* and *C* laugh at this self-deprecation, but do not reject it. Therefore, as they continue to laugh, A introduces his own rejection which *B* and *C* rapidly endorse. *B*, in fact, does not merely support A's rejection of the self-deprecation, but provides a basis for it by saying, 'you're not that sort of man.' One can infer from such a response that *B* is saying, among other things, that *A* is a man of decent character and a man who behaves respectably, and that the response is therefore complimentary.

When an actor makes a self-deprecatory comment about her character or behaviour, it is perhaps fairly easy for others to reject the assessment by simply using a negative, because what is being assessed might only occasionally be evident. However, when that person makes a similarly negative assessment of her own appearance, it can be harder to reject the assessment and offer a compliment in response, because the

evidence may be in front of one's eyes. In the example that follows, two female writers, broadcasters, and entertainers, *A* and *B*, are present together on a phone-in programme on a national radio station in the United Kingdom. The extract is taken from the beginning of the programme, where the two are talking together before answering calls, and each makes a self-deprecatory statement about her appearance and each appears to reject the assessment that the other has made. They begin by talking about a dinner that *B* attended.

[TR:C:96:N8:2]

- B: Well I wo::re this divine outfit=it cost a lot and I had to (shut) the whole way to Wanstead in Essex to get it=  
A: =Oh for Heaven's sake=  
B: =Well because I'm a fat lady and you know you know you [can't get a fat lady's clothes]  
A: [I wouldn't have said that] I wouldn't ha I would have said you're a generous woman=  
B: =OK=  
A: =er proportioned in a sort of (.) ra rather larger kind of way but er what was it like ...

In the extract above, *B* does not mention her weight, but she does say there and elsewhere in the conversation that she cannot buy clothes in ordinary shops and has to seek out specialist shops. In response to her self-deprecation, however, *A* offers a skilful response. The skilful nature of this response will be described in the discussion which follows the extract below.

In the second example of a self-deprecation taken from the same conversation, the roles are reversed and it is *A* who makes a negative assessment of her own appearance.



[TR:C:96:N8:1]

- A: You see I have very poor hair Vanessa=  
B: =Oh=  
A: =Very very poor hair=  
B: =I'd never say that=  
A: =But mu you see you cou you know cos you're sitting face to face with me on a Sunday morning and you saw me the other night and I had a big bouffant=  
B: =YOU LOOKED GOOD that bouffant [was good]  
A: [Well I tell] you something those make-up ladies at Thames Television do they know what they're doing ...

If a person has thinning hair, greying hair, greasy hair, or hair with dandruff, the condition may be fairly obvious to someone close to them, and *A* treats the statement that she has 'very poor hair' as incontrovertible because *B* is sitting opposite her and can see the truth of what she is saying. Nevertheless, *B* attempts to provide a preferred response to a self-deprecation, by in some way disagreeing with it. The difficulty she has in doing so might be suggested by the fact that the attempt to constitute a preferred response is made only after *A* repeats her self-deprecation and intensifies it.

*B*'s difficulty in this situation is that a failure to provide any response to a self-deprecation would be dispreferred, because it would be noticeable and accountable and the silence would be interpreted as agreement. Similarly, to disagree with the self-deprecation and to say 'no, you're not fat' or 'no, you have nice hair' might also be a dispreferred response, because to contradict what is obviously true would be noticeable and accountable. It might be interpreted as being in some way insulting to *A*. The adept solution that *B* employs is exactly the same solution that *A* employed

when she was obliged to look at *B* and deny that she was fat. Thus, when *A* says 'I have very poor hair,' *B* replies with the phrase 'I'd never say that,' and the use of this phrase is doubly advantageous. On the one hand, it allows *B* to offer a preferred, negative response to *A*'s self-deprecation, while on the other hand it does not commit her to a possibly dispreferred denial of the truth of what *A* has said. 'I would never say' is an effective solution because it allows *B* to make a truthful answer, while at the same time giving *A* the freedom to place the more attractive interpretation on *B*'s words. In this second example, *B*'s meaning might be, 'I *think* you have poor hair, but I would never say that because I am a considerate person,' but *A* is free to understand the utterance as, 'I don't think you have poor hair and therefore I would never say such a thing.' The ambiguity of such a phrase allows *B* to steer a course between the dangers of dispreferred agreement and dispreferred disagreement, and it is the existence of a clever negative construction which allows her to do so.

The discovery of the value of a phrase such as 'I wouldn't say that' is something that awaits the EFL student who examines recordings or transcripts of naturally-occurring data, and this is one of the great strengths of the conversation analytic approach. The student is not told to go out and collect examples of utterances that are familiar to all of us, but instead is trained in the 'ethno' methods of indexicality, reflexivity, the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives, and is encouraged and challenged to put them to use in the examination of naturally-occurring data. The method of data collection therefore has a great influence not only on what *is* discovered, but also on what *can be* discovered and this is the principal theme of the next section.



## ***5.5 Compliments in extended sequences***

The preceding section concluded by noting that the differences in the data collection methods of researchers in sociolinguistics and conversation analysis naturally influence the type and number of examples that members of each group can collect, and the results that they achieve are reflected in the terms 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' that describe their respective methods. There is, however, one type of compliment that the conversation analyst is perhaps uniquely well equipped to collect, and that is the one that occurs in an extended sequence of talk, where a complimentary assessment may be negotiated by the interactants over a series of turns lasting a number of minutes.

In his review of the contrasting research methods of sociolinguistics and conversation analysis, Cohen (1996:393) reports that, for ethnographic research, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) 'found a bias in favor of short exchanges because the investigators were not able to record long exchanges in their notebooks.' This section will argue that it is physically impossible for the ethnographic method to capture the essence of certain sequences, simply because of the limitations of the human memory. Researchers who employ this method are not only incapable of recording exchanges beyond a certain length, but they also have no means of confirming the claims they make about the accuracy of what they record. The section will repeat the conversation analytic maxim that 'participant reaction is a crucial index of meaning' (Bilmes 1985:321) and will stress the fact, referred to in the previous section, that an isolated speech act has many potential interactional or perlocutionary effects, as Cohen

(1996:383) says of 'Sorry about that!' This is an utterance which

may serve as an adequate apology in some situations. In others it may be perceived as a rude, even arrogant, nonapology (Cohen 1996:383).

In contrast to the maxim of 'participant reaction,' the ethnographic method seems to assume that the immediate judgment of the observer is adequate to identify an utterance as a compliment, because, as Manes and Wolfson (1981:127) report, their students 'did not ask that compliments be described or defined for them and they indicated no confusion concerning what was expected of them.'

The maxim of 'participant reaction' was illustrated in Sections 3.1 and 5.1.2 of this thesis. A sixty-three second exchange between a radio interviewer and an architect was analyzed, and the first two turns in the exchange were as follows:

[RF:l:89:4:1]

- A: With me is (Stuart Moscrop) who's the designer and architect of the museum. It seems to me to be er (1.0) pleasantly modernist. Can I call it that?=  
B: =Call it what you like. If that's what it seems to you that's fine ...

The earlier analysis noted that A's first turn includes a semantically weak compliment, 'It seems to me to be er (1.0) pleasantly modernist,' while his third turn begins, 'You've created a very (.) beautiful building a very seductive building.' The thesis claimed that there seems to be a clear interactional relationship between B's response to the weak compliment in A's first turn and the much stronger compliment in A's third turn. It also



claimed that as about sixty-three seconds elapsed from the beginning of *A*'s first turn to the completion of the compliment in *A*'s third turn, the student data collector with a note pad might be able to record the two compliments, but she would be unlikely to recognize the link between the two, and that is because the stretch of talk is simply too long and too detailed. The conversation analyst, however, listens repeatedly to audio-taped and video-taped recordings of spoken interaction, and studies transcripts, and is able to consider both what is said by one actor and also how another actor reacts to a particular utterance. The difference that this makes to the analysis of interaction will be illustrated with the use of another extended sequence.

The example below is taken from a recording of a programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom and part of this text was discussed briefly in Section 4.1.2 above. A male presenter (*A*) is talking on the telephone to a British actress (*B*) who is in a nearby theatre preparing for a matinee performance. *B* is playing the part of the early twentieth-century British music hall performer, Marie LLoyd, and they begin by discussing that role.

[RS:l:89:13:2]

- A: I would imagine er:: it certainly looks right it's just about ideal casting I would think isn't it=  
B: =Umm (.) yes it wasn't (.) er I was the right height but not the right weight so I put on two stone=  
A: =.hhhhh Really=  
B: =Yes it was good fun getting there [it's gonna be] horrible getting it off=  
A: [wa::::s it]  
B: =Well that that's the thing because it's all very well letting yourself go and putting some weight on but it is difficult to get weight off ...

The discussion in Section 4.1.2 suggested that *A* was complimenting *B* on her suitability for the role, in so far as she is both an actress and a singer. A student data collector might also think that a compliment is being offered, because *A*'s utterance, 'It certainly looks right it's just about ideal casting,' matches the pattern of the most standardized compliment, 'NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ.' *A* has a problem, however, and that is that although *B* is a well-known actress, he is speaking to her on the telephone and his compliment is ambiguous, because it might refer either to her physical appearance or to her talent. *B*'s response addresses itself to the first alternative and she explains that she was not an ideal physical choice for the role of Marie Lloyd, because she was significantly slimmer than the character she was playing. *A*'s attempt to pay a compliment therefore misfires, and it does so because of the ambiguity inherent in the words he uses. This minor incident, however, appears to pass off smoothly, but a later exchange suggests that it might not have been forgotten.

The actress, whose name is Adrienne Posta, appeared in a successful film when she was only a teenager. The film starred Sidney Poitier and was called, "To Sir With Love," and the interviewer refers to it in this second extract. The talk in this extract occurs approximately fifteen minutes after the talk in the first extract.

[RS:I:89:13:2]

- |   |    |                                                                                         |
|---|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | A: | But I'll tell you (.) <u>one</u> thing that many people might (.) envy even <u>more</u> |
| 2 |    | (.) you <u>for</u> (.) gosh that was a neatly put sentence wasn't it=                   |
| 3 | B: | =Yes that was (.) <u>great</u> grammar lad that=                                        |
| 4 | A: | =Than that working with him=                                                            |
| 5 | B: | =((laughs)) than what working with him=                                                 |
| 6 | A: | =Yes=                                                                                   |
| 7 | B: | =((laughs))=                                                                            |
| 8 | A: | =is (.) working with erm (.) tuh erm what's I've forgotten his name after               |



9 all [that you put me off]  
 10 B: [[[ laughs ]]] oh dear this is great isn't it?=  
 11 A: =Sidney Poitier [that's who I'm trying to think on] Sidney Poitier (.) in=  
 12 B: [Oh he's lovely]  
 13 A: ="To Sir With Love" I remember that terribly well=  
 14 B: =Oh it was lovely=  
 15 A: =You and Lulu=  
 16 B: =That's right=  
 17 A: =In the classroom=  
 18 B: =Yes=  
 19 A: =How did that all come about?=  
 20 B: =Erm:: well I was doing pop singing at the time (.) I was only (.) sixteen  
 21 [and er] ((laughs))=  
 22 A: [ Golly ]  
 23 B: =I was ( ) trying to be a pop singer=  
 24 A: =I don't say 'golly' cos I can't believe you were only sixteen at the time  
 25 I mean I'm surprised you were that old (.) I'd hate you to misinterpret my  
 26 'golly'=  
 27 B: =Wait a minute you thought I was younger than that=  
 28 A: =Well I hadn't really thought about it at all but when you said 'I was doing  
 29 pop singing at the time and I was only sixteen years old' and I went  
 30 'golly' which might have sounded like I thought pu:::h she was was more  
 31 than sixteen [at the time] but I actually meant 'golly so you were doing=  
 32 B: [No I wasn't]  
 33 A: =pop singing at the time'=  
 34 B: =I was yes I was doing pop singing at the time ...

One of the noticeable and accountable features of this exchange occurs in *A*'s turn which begins on line 22 and continues until line 31. In response to *B*'s statement that she was involved in pop singing at the age of sixteen, *A* expresses surprise with his utterance of the term 'Golly.' *B*'s next turn shows a change from 'I was doing pop singing' to 'I was ( ) trying to be a pop singer,' and it is possible that in making this change she is qualifying what she thought was perhaps too bold a claim. However, there appears to be nothing that is interactionally difficult for *B* in the exchanges between lines 20 and 23. Hence, *A*'s explanation of his use of 'Golly' on line 24 is noticeable, because he appears to be apologizing at length for something that has not been signalled as problematic. Such an action prompts the listener and the analyst to

ask, 'Why that now?' (Bilmes 1985). Why is *A* so concerned about a legitimate expression of surprise? At the age of sixteen, most teenagers are either still in school or are dreaming about success in adult life, and therefore to express surprise at the news of *B*'s youthful professional success should not be noticeable or accountable. *A*, however, seems to think that his utterance was both.

One possible explanation is that *A* is just not a very competent interviewer. He might make mistakes so frequently that he has acquired the habit of apologizing even when no offense has been committed. However, this broadcaster's work was recorded because he was popular in the Solent region of the United Kingdom and because many hours of recordings showed him to be skilful, perceptive, and sensitive, among other things. Hence, it seems as though the reason for his explanation of his expression of surprise lies elsewhere.

Another possibility, therefore, might be that this utterance is interactionally related to his failed compliment, 'it certainly looks right.' Expressions of surprise, such as 'Golly' or 'Wow,' can have a complimentary function. They can comment in a vague way on the achievements of others, and 'Golly' could have functioned as a complimentary evaluation of the news that *B* had been a pop singer at the age of sixteen. *A* implies, in fact, that he made the remark without considering what his research might have told him about *B*'s early career, and that he was simply impressed by the news. However, having made that comment, *A* might then have remembered the interactional failure of the earlier ambiguous compliment and felt the need to clarify this one. The earlier utterance was taken by *B* as a reference to her appearance, and *A*'s later comment



relates to *B*'s age, although in an innocuous way. However, age and appearance are sensitive subjects for people in the entertainment industry and, as *A* had made a mistake with one, he might be overly sensitive about the other.

Whatever the interactional significance of *A*'s explanation of his use of 'Golly,' the point is that it is only the research procedures of conversation analysis that make it possible even to draw attention to two exchanges that might be related, but that are separated by fifteen minutes of talk. An ethnographer with a note book, on the other hand, might notice a particular utterance, but she cannot possibly record that utterance and every subsequent word and pause just in case something interesting arises. Her methods restrict her to what is physically possible and that tends to be the short, the simple, and the relatively unambiguous.

Researchers in sociolinguistics are therefore handicapped, to some degree, by the research methods that they choose to employ. The insights they have are no doubt at least as valuable as those of the conversation analysts, but without tape-recordings to replay and transcripts to study they have greater difficulty in verifying their insights or in displaying the complexity of the exchanges. Kasper and Dahl (1991:216) note that data collection is a 'powerful determinant of the final product' and the data collection method of Manes and Wolfson (1981) and their followers has produced 'NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ.' This thesis believes that the methods of conversation analysis can offer students a greater understanding of the structure and complexity of spoken interaction.

## 5.6 Compliments and genre

Section 5.2 of this thesis described the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic approach to the study of compliments. That section attempted to reflect Garfinkel's (1967:4-7) belief that all language is indexical, and to argue that not even a bland utterance such as 'I like your haircut' can safely be interpreted as a compliment unless the indexical circumstances of the utterance support such a claim. A more specific way of looking at the indexical nature of compliments is by means of the burgeoning field of genre analysis (Bhatia 1993; Couture 1986; Dudley-Evans 1987; Swales 1990). The connection between the two derives from the fact that

observing closely how people orient themselves in their linguistic behaviour towards the social norms that constrain genres is very much the manner in which *ethnomethodological* investigations of discourse are carried out (McCarthy and Carter 1994:26).

McCarthy and Carter (1994:117) add that

working with real data, ethnomethodologists attempt to describe such events [as explaining, arguing, telling anecdotes, agreeing and disagreeing, inviting, apologizing, requesting and thanking] in terms of patterned behaviour within particular cultures, especially aiming at the elusive objectivity which can be achieved only by viewing one's own culture as 'exotic'. The kinds of patterns thus observed are sets of elements in sequence, the presence and ordering which represent an idealized version of a particular culture's requirements for the realization of an activity such as inviting, apologizing or whatever. As such, they are characterizations of different *genres*.

Very few researchers have investigated compliments within specified genres. Manes and Wolfson (1981) and members of their school of sociolinguistic research into



complimenting behaviour collected most of their data from mundane conversation and social interaction among a diverse group of Americans (Wolfson 1989:110). Since some of Wolfson's (*ibid.*) data 'include compliments given and received by jewelers, hairdressers, clergymen, doctors and salesclerks,' there must be genre-specific examples within that collection. However, they are not analyzed as such, and the other researchers who have replicated and extended their work are generally equally uninformative about the relationship between compliment and context and genre. In ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, on the other hand, there are two notable pieces of research which do investigate compliments within specified genres. One is Mulkey's (1984) work on compliments paid to Nobel Prize winners, and the other is Emmison's (1987) account of the evaluations of the victors and the vanquished on the sports field.

Mulkey (1984) was interested in learning whether Pomerantz's (1978) findings about compliments and responses in conversational interaction would aid the analysis of 'the ultimate compliment': that paid to a Nobel Laureate. Pomerantz (1978) had shown that actors have difficulty in accepting compliments and she suggested that this was because the recipient of the compliment is subject to two conflicting constraints. On the one hand, there is the requirement to act in accordance with the preference for agreement and therefore to accept the compliment. On the other hand, there is the requirement to avoid the self-praise that is involved in accepting a compliment, and therefore to reject it. Pomerantz's work (1978) reveals that actors respond to these conflicting preferences by downgrading compliments, and by disagreeing with them, and returning or reassigning them.

Mulkay's (1984) study found remarkable similarity between the ways in which compliments are responded to in mundane conversation and the ways in which Nobel Prize Winners responded to 'the ultimate compliment.' He noted, however,

the virtual absence of evaluative disagreement on the part of Laureates, the low level and restrained character of Laureates' self-praise, the modest proportion of returns and downgrades, plus the very high incidence of reassignments (*Ibid.*:547).

Mulkay's (*Ibid.*) conclusion was that 'the concepts and assumptions adopted from [Conversation Analysis] provide an elegant and simple explanation of certain important features of these ceremonies.'

Although the actions involved in responding to a compliment are similar in mundane conversation and in speeches at the Nobel Prize ceremony, the content of those compliments and the way in which they are realized are, of course, affected by the genre. The Nobel Committee did not use the commonplace adjectives identified by Manes and Wolfson (1981) to describe the work of prize-winning scientists, but described the different scientists as 'a genius,' an 'uncontested leader and master,' or 'one of the greatest experimenters of our time,' and their work as 'epoch-making,' 'ingenious,' or 'simple and elegant' (Mulkay 1984:536-537).

Similarly, the evaluations used to depict the winners of the Literature Prize are far removed from the formulaic utterances described in the literature on complimenting, and they



ranged from 'master of deliberate creation,' 'strict discipline,' and 'unerring perspicacity,' through 'stimulating and edifying,' 'morally responsible,' and 'nourished by mercy,' to 'inexhaustible fantasy,' 'consummate stylist,' 'forceful epic power' and 'Epicurean heroism.' There was little repetition of terms, except for 'originality,' 'broad-minded' and 'stylist' (*Ibid.*).

It is a maxim of conversation analysis that an utterance is designed for a particular recipient (Schegloff 1988b:97), and so while 'pretty,' 'nice' and 'good' are appropriate evaluations among acquaintances on an American university campus or in a middle-class neighbourhood, they would clearly not be adequate at the Nobel Prize ceremony. Neither would they be sufficient in the next genre to be examined, the sports commentary (Ferguson 1983; Ghadessy 1988; Romaine 1994).

A second genre that has been studied is the 'ceremony' that follows the completion of a sports event, when compliments are paid to the victors and commiserations are given to the vanquished (Emmison 1987). These compliments are responded to very much in the manner reported by Pomerantz (1978), although the genre makes it difficult, for example, for return compliments to be paid to the interviewer (Emmison 1987:97). In the related 'discourse genre' known as the sports commentary (Ghadessy 1988:18), however, complimenting has received only limited attention. Ghadessy's (1988) study of written reports of soccer matches reveals the use of two types of interpretation: one employing 'uninvolved' language and the other employing 'involved' language. In one, an objective account of the event is given, while in the other a personal view or opinion is presented.

Two writers may agree that a goal was scored in the 76th minute of a particular game, but disagree as to whether it was a brilliant, breath-taking, clever, simple, etc. goal. Thus the first part, i.e. agreement, related to the objective

interpretation and the latter to subjective interpretation (*ibid.*).

Ghadessy (1988:23) fed thirty-seven match reports

into the National University of Singapore Computer System. Word frequencies, collocational patterns and other specific information on any vocabulary item/grammatical pattern were obtained by using the Oxford Concordance Programme (OCP). The corpus comprised of 15,295 tokens and 3,312 types.

Seven pages of the article deal with 'uninvolved' language, while three deal with 'involved' language. Section 5.3 of this thesis discussed the work of Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) and, in particular, the effects of identifying compliments in a data base by using a concordancing program. Ghadessy (1988) uses such a procedure and his work reveals the shortcomings of this approach to the study of complimenting. His study of 'involved' or evaluative language required the computer program to scan the data for semantically positive adjectives and it revealed the use of such terms as 'good,' 'great,' 'exciting,' and 'superb' in the soccer commentaries (*ibid.*:32). This thesis, however, believes that a study of naturally occurring data would once again reveal a more diverse and complex pattern of complimenting than is described by the Manes and Wolfson (1981) model, and a discussion of one brief extract will hint at the possibilities.

The extract below is taken from the commentary on a rugby union international between Australia and South Africa. A and B are Australian male commentators.



[STV:CTY:97:V14]

- A: Thunderous drive into that er ruck by the Australians=  
B: =that's a very poor start (.) by South Africa=(Andrej Snejman) running in  
far too upright and straight into four defenders and the ball turned over  
straight away ...

Indexical knowledge is important in recognizing a compliment in a genre such as the sports commentary on television, because the person or group to which it is addressed does not reply to it. The viewer with a knowledge of a given game, with a picture of the action, and with some information about the commentators is in a position to make competent inferences about the commentator's indexical utterances. Thus, despite the absence in *A*'s comment of any of the semantically positive adjectives or verbs recorded by Manes and Wolfson (1981), and despite the criticisms of violent play in rugby union in recent years, a person listening to the commentary would infer that *A*'s utterance was complimentary rather than critical. When an Australian commentator uses a phrase such as, 'thunderous drive,' to describe the performance of Australian players, it would generally index, for the sports fan, explosive power, co-ordination, determination, purpose, enthusiasm, and success. However, had these words not matched the actions of the players, then the comment might have been interpreted as ironic or incompetent, and the British sports commentator, David Coleman, developed a perhaps unfair reputation for, amongst other things, not matching his words to the unfolding drama on the screen.

If a person who heard *A*'s comment, 'thunderous drive into that er ruck by the Australians,' and who watched the Australian forwards drive into the ruck still doubted

that *A* was describing an Australian success and complimenting the Australians for it, his doubts would very likely be erased by the observations of *A*'s fellow commentator, *B*. The latter contrasts South Africa's poor play with Australia's very determined play ('straight into four defenders'), and in doing so, he not only re-inforces *A*'s interpretation of the game, but he elucidates it. Thus, the interaction between indexical knowledge, the actions that are taking place, the commentator's words, and their sequential effects allow listeners to draw appropriate inferences from indexical utterances.

A study of complimenting in sports commentaries might suggest, therefore, that the 'involved' language of the sports commentary is more diversified than Ghadessy's (1988) computer program leads us to believe. From a practical EFL point of view in Brunei, the sports commentary merits attention because this nation of three hundred thousand people is currently galvanised by the continuing success of its national soccer team, and the enthusiasm for the sport affects young and old and male and female alike. For those teachers who are in a position to choose the written or spoken texts they use, the soccer commentary could prove to be a motivating and rewarding one. Even the grammar teacher with little freedom to depart from the syllabus might draw her students' attention to the complex or heavy NP constructions found in the register of sports reporting (Romaine 1994:71-73).

A third and final example of a genre from which a variety of compliments might be drawn is the 'celebrity interview,' in which an effort appears to be made to design the compliment to match the guest celebrity's achievements or character. The use of the



term 'genre' to describe this type of interview would be in accordance with Biber (1994), but perhaps not with Bhatia (1993) or Swales (1990). However, this thesis is concerned primarily with preference organization and complimenting, rather than with the as yet unresolved questions of what constitutes a genre or a register (Leckie-Tarry 1993).

The BBC's World Service Television network broadcasts a daily programme called "Hardtalk," and each programme has a different interviewee. Short extracts will be drawn from recordings of four of these programmes. In the first extract, a male interviewer (A) is talking to the writer, Dame Muriel Spark (B).

[WSTV:l:97:V10]

- A: Dame Muriel you won tremendous fame and acclaim around the world with "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie", a novel play a film=why do you think it was such an extraordinary success?=  
B: =Er I really don't know=if it had been left to me I would never have made a film of it=I wouldn't have thought of it but er er (0.5) the adaptor who's (Jay Press ( ) ) a lady from Texas she's a very good technician (.) a writer of films and plays (0.5) thought of adapting it ...

In his first turn, the interviewer positively evaluates both Dame Muriel's own standing and that of her best known work, and he asks her to explain the success of "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie." However, despite the many times that she must have read the work or seen it performed, and despite the many years that she has had to reflect on the book and its success, she professes not to be able to explain why it has had such an effect. Although she is unable to avoid acknowledging the impact of the book, she nevertheless counters this acceptance by attributing part of its success to a collaborator. Thus, on the one hand, she displays the reluctance to accept praise

that Pomerantz (1978) identified, while on the other she shows a willingness to be agreeable to the interviewer by providing an answer. It is likely, also, that just as the interviewer's compliments were designed for this particular interviewee, so the interviewee's answers were designed for this particular programme. She recognises that the genre demands information about her life and her person, rather than a discussion of literary technique, and she therefore uses the claim of ignorance both to deal with the compliment and to stay within the topical constraints of the genre.

The second extract comes from an interview with the Hollywood actor, Charlton Heston (*B*). The male interviewer (*A*) begins with a compliment that is appropriate to Charlton Heston's status.

[WSTV:I:97:V11]

- A: Charlton Heston a very warm welcome to "Hardtalk"=the cry went up in our studio when we heard that you'd arrived="God is here"=how do you take to all this fame?=
- B: =Well you I've been (.) er a public face for a long time now and it just is er part of your (.) of yourself=it's er you have to learn to be a public person (.) er you learn it after a while and er (.) it's perhaps different from your real self=I like a great many actors=Olivier is an offhand example (.) er am a fairly private person (.) even shy=I think that's one of the reasons many people become actors=it gives them a chance to be someone else ...

The compliment is indexical in so far as it alludes to *B*'s roles in Biblical epics, and it is perhaps adapted to the genre because it is produced in an opening move and because its extravagance reflects the nature of the interview. In his response, *B* acknowledges the preference for avoiding self-praise by suggesting that the acclaim is directed at his public persona rather than at his real self, and this is an interesting



example of an individual reassigning praise.

It is perhaps also instructive to compare the compliments paid to a major Hollywood star with those paid to the British actor who was mentioned in Section 5.2 and who was appearing in a provincial theatre in England. It was claimed earlier that "You've worked with Elizabeth Taylor" was a compliment paid by the interviewer in order to console the British actor for a disappointment in his career. However, with Charlton Heston, the indexical circumstances are different and the same utterance would not be so clearly complimentary if addressed to him, because he has spent decades in the company of people such as Elizabeth Taylor. Hence, he might treat such an utterance as a request for information rather than as a compliment, and this is therefore another reminder of the fact that compliments are designed for particular recipients.

The third extract is taken from an interview with Quentin Crisp (*B*), whom the male interviewer (*A*) describes as a 'raconteur and wit.' The interview takes place in New York, where *B* moved after the success of his film biography, "The Naked Civil Servant." The interview begins with the two of them standing.

[WSTV:I:97:V6]

A: Quentin Crisp welcome to "Hardtalk"=thank you very much for agreeing to do this=you're still I see one of the great sights of New York=

B: =In a way yes

A: Shall we go and talk?

((Three and a half minutes later))

A: People talk about you as (.) one of the gay icons of New York=what kind

- of responsibility does that bestow on you?=  
 B: =Well that's very worrying=they say I'm a gay icon but really I was just a hopeless case and=  
 A: =((laughs))=  
 B: =I don't know how it sprung up that I'm a gay icon (.) because as I say I did what I (.) I did what I (.) I couldn't do otherwise than I did=  
 A: =Which is be yourself ...

As one of the opening moves of these celebrity interviews is to pay a compliment to the interviewee, *A's* evaluation in his first turn might be construed as a compliment. It is another extravagant suggestion, and it might have been deemed appropriate for a witty man. *B* simply accepts the assessment, but prefaces his acceptance with the words, 'In a way.' These, of course, allow for multiple interpretations, including the possibility of reading the 'compliment' as something else. Approximately three and a half minutes later, *A* makes a second evaluation. In his first turn, he had said, 'one of the great sights of New York,' and in this turn he says, 'one of the gay icons of New York.' *B's* reaction to this compliment, however, is to disclaim responsibility for the status that has been assigned to him and to suggest that it was something of an accident. Such a response might be described as a reassignment, in so far as he says that his status as 'a gay icon' is the work of others.

The final extract provides something of a contrast, because the interviewee is Fernando Enrique Cardoso, the President of Brazil (*B*). The interviewer (*A*) is male and he begins by listing President Cardoso's achievements.

[WSTV:l:97:4]

- A: Fernando Enrique Cardoso welcome to "Hardtalk"=  
 B: =Thank you  
 A: Your plan your (real) plan has brought down inflation by an incredible



- amount from maybe two thousand seven [hundred per cent] or more or=
- B: [or more]
- A: =more down to single digits=
- B: =That's right=
- A: =You've tripled (.) investment from abroad in your country (.) everything seems to be going remarkably well (.) isn't it a little bit too good to be true perhaps=
- B: =Well it is indeed too good to be true but if you look (.) or to the social aspects in Brazil you see that it's not that beautiful you see=you have enormous problems with poverty=you still have to rebuild the state the government ...

The achievements mentioned are outstanding and indisputable, and therefore not only does President Cardoso agree with the interviewer, but he interrupts in order to provide a more accurate evaluation. Nevertheless, he then downgrades the compliment that is implicit in the list of achievements by noting that success has not been total and that many problems remain unresolved in Brazil. The compliment here, as elsewhere, is designed to suit the addressee.

Although few researchers other than Emmison (1987) and Mulkay (1984) have studied compliments within specified genres, the potential of such studies seems considerable. ESP, for example, is a well established field within ELT, but it appears to have produced no studies of complimenting in any written or spoken genre, despite the value of such an activity to students in business or management. Williams (1988) has noted the discrepancy between textbook models of the language of business and the language actually used in business meetings, but she suggests that the confidentiality of such talk makes the collection of authentic data difficult. In South-east Asia, there is a possible solution to this problem, and that is to record and analyze the talk on one of the many business programmes broadcast by CNN or the World Television Service

of the BBC. These recordings would not provide examples of the confidential talk of business meetings, but they would provide authentic examples of talk about business by business people and, as such, this talk could be contrasted with the talk depicted in ESP texts.

The studies of genre-specific complimenting discussed in this section suggest furthermore that although the work of Pomerantz (1978) is cited far less often than that of Manes and Wolfson (1981) and although it has been replicated far less often, it nevertheless provides a more important insight into the act of complimenting than does the information that compliments often appear in the form, NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ. The knowledge that actors have to deal with two conflicting preferences when responding to compliments equips the student with a tool for examining compliments and responses.



## ***5.7 Compliments and preference organization***

One of the principal weaknesses of research in the tradition of Manes and Wolfson (1981) is that one fundamental, but difficult, question is never addressed. That question is, 'How do I know whether a given utterance is an example of a compliment (or of a preferred or dispreferred action)?' This is a question that ought to occur to any investigator, particularly if that person is studying tapes and transcripts of conversation. It is also a question that is of the greatest relevance to the two topics that are central to this thesis: preference organization and complimenting. However, the failure to address this question adequately in the first case, or to address it at all in the second case has had serious consequences for both fields of study. Just as the literature on preference organization appears to have atrophied because of the lack of a clear and reliable means of saying that an utterance is preferred or dispreferred, so the sociolinguistic literature on compliments has failed to develop because the question has not been raised, and very little progress is evident between Wolfson (1979) and Herbert (1997).

The research methodology of conversation analysis, however, makes the question above inevitable, because conversation analysis studies interaction and not isolated speech acts. The methodology necessitates an examination of how the addressee of a particular utterance responds to that utterance, not just in the adjacent utterance, but in subsequent utterances as well. One answer that conversation analysis offers to the question of how to determine whether an utterance is a compliment, therefore, is that when we hear an

utterance with the illocutionary force potential of a compliment (Flowerdew 1990:86), we observe the reaction of the addressee and we attempt to discern from that reaction and from subsequent reactions whether she displays a recognition of the utterance as a compliment. A second answer that conversation analysis offers is that we employ indexical knowledge in seeking to understand what we hear, and both types of evidence will be illustrated below.

To illustrate the way in which participant reaction and subsequent utterances can provide evidence for any claims about what is happening in an interaction, the thesis will examine briefly two 'compliments' which express similar sentiments, and which were delivered for similar reasons in similar circumstances. It will show, however, that their interactional effects were far from similar. Both utterances are addressed to the presenters of phone-in programmes, and they follow the return of the presenter to the programme after a period of absence. The example of a successful compliment is one that was used in Chapter 5, section 3 above. In this first extract, a male programme presenter (A) on a local radio station in the United Kingdom is talking to a female caller (B).

[CR:PI:96:55:1]

B: I used to listen to you when you were on Talk Radio=

A: =Yes=

B: =and I rang you in=

A: =Yeah

B: an I had a chat with you=

A: =Ye:::s=

B: =I lost you completely and last night I was mucking through the radio=

A: =Uh huh



B: with the channels (.) and didn't I find Caesar the Geezer? An I was so::  
happy that I've been trying to get through to you since ten o'clock=  
A: God [bless you darlin]  
B: [an I'm a first time] caller=  
A: =D'you know I've been here for six months  
B: I kno::w I missed you so:: much=  
A: =Oh bless your heart=  
B: =and I'm so happy that I'm back on to your station again  
A: Thank you very much indeed I'm so pleased you're there

*B* listens to the radio in the United Kingdom and has a wide choice of stations and programmes from which to choose. However, she favours *A*'s programme in particular and she tells him so, but not by saying 'I like your programme.' Instead she says how happy she is to hear his programme once again and how much she has missed him. *A* shows his recognition of the admiration *B* expresses and the loyalty she displays by thanking her warmly and repeatedly. Thus, a strong positive evaluation is recognized as complimentary by the addressee, and he expresses his thanks for it.

The second extract, in which the caller appears to have a similar objective to the caller in the preceding extract, comes from a recording of a programme on Malaysian radio. A male presenter (*A*) is talking to a young male caller (*B*).

[MR:PI:96:N26:2]

A: Good morning=  
B: =Hello=  
A: =Hello (.) good morning=  
B: =Are yous (.) Radio Four=  
A: =((laughs)) Yes=

B: =Yous Radio Four=can I speak with Patrick (Teo) please?  
 A: Yes you can  
 B: (1.5) Hello=  
 A: =Yah what?  
 B: Is this Patrick (Teo)?=  
 A: =Yes it is=what do you want to say?  
 B: (0.5) Oh I just wanted to say that ah::: (2.0) it's nice having you back (.) on Radio Four  
 A: (1.0) Thank you=  
 B: =And ah::: I I enjoy your programme=  
 A: =Thanks=  
 B: =Cos the other DJs are really boring=  
 A: =((laughs)) Oh de::ar (.) thank you very much OK  
 B: OK bye=  
 A: =Bye

A's laughter in his third turn suggests perhaps that his young caller's English is not up to the standard of that of his usual callers, although the only real evidence for this is one mispronunciation. *B* has phoned in to speak to *A*, but he does not know the identity of the person to whom he is talking. Therefore, he asks to speak to Patrick (Teo), he is told he can, and he waits to do so. The exchange, 'Can I speak with Patrick (Teo) please?', 'Yes you can,' is an odd one, however. If *A*'s laughter does mean that he thinks *B* has some difficulty with English, then his response, 'Yes you can,' is not helpful. Instead of treating the utterance as the request that it clearly is, he treats it as a question to which he gives the answer, 'Yes.'

When a caller asks, 'Can I speak to X?' and the answerer replies, 'Yes you can,' it is reasonable to assume that the person who has answered the call is not the person who was called (Schegloff 1988). Hence, *B* waits for one and a half seconds, but when Patrick



(Teo), the person called, does not announce himself, *B* speaks again. He then hears that he is speaking to the same person that he spoke to a few seconds earlier and he correctly infers that he is speaking to the person he called, i.e. Patrick (Teo). Given that *B* has used a form of request that is commonplace in the genre, *A*'s response is noticeable and accountable. The oddity of *A*'s response leads the conversation analyst to ask, once again, 'Why that now?' (Bilmes 1985). Why has *A* implied that *B*'s English is faulty and why has he then put *B* in the position of appearing to be interactionally incompetent? Furthermore, why has he not treated this young caller in the same way as he treats other callers? The standard opening moves in these exchanges include asking the caller what his name is, where he is calling from, and so forth, and the preferred action is to welcome the caller and help him.

A single hearing of this exchange might have led those who listened to the programme to conclude that the young caller was neither capable of handling the language properly, nor of handling the demands of the genre. This single hearing might, of course, be the most perceptive, because it might well be the case that the caller is simply incompetent. However, the conversation analyst, who has the opportunity to listen to the tape repeatedly and to study a transcript of the conversation, is in a position to proffer a different conclusion. That conclusion is that the caller is made to appear interactionally incompetent by the failure of the programme presenter to offer the conditionally relevant response to the caller's question, 'Can I speak to Patrick (Teo)?' The presenter's response, 'Yes you can,' contrasts markedly with the preferred responses of other

presenters on Malaysian radio, as the following short extract shows. This extract offers an example of the opening of a conversation which is remarkably similar to the preceding one. A male presenter (A) is speaking to a female caller (B).

[MR:PI:96:N23:1]

- A: Hello (.) hello  
B: Hello  
A: Good morning=  
B: =Good morning Radio Four?=  
A: =Yes=  
B: =Yes er can I speak to (.) Mr Alan Zacharia?=  
A: =Speaking you're on the air (2.0) you're on the air=you're on Radio Four ...

It is an interesting feature of Malaysian radio that the programme presenters identify the station that they work for, but that they tend not to identify themselves. Hence, the callers generally ask if they are speaking to a particular person or if they can speak to that person. The fact that such a question is routinely asked not only reinforces the claim that Patrick (Teo's) response, 'Yes you can,' is noticeable and accountable, but it makes it appear sanctionable as well. The presenter's professional failure to adopt a reciprocity of perspectives and to see what the caller wanted to achieve appears to be deliberately unhelpful and hurtful, and, as such, it is a dispreferred response.

Not only is Patrick (Teo's) 'Yes you can' a dispreferred response, but his next two utterances ('Yah what?' and 'Yes it is=what do you want to say?') can also be described



as dispreferred, because they are not at all representative of the language that a host, as he is, should use to a guest. However, despite the absence of any words of greeting from *A*, *B* announces that the purpose of his call is to welcome *A* back and to compliment him on his work. In view of the way in which *A* has addressed *B*, it is not surprising that there is a pause before *A* offers his first expression of thanks to *B*. The caution can perhaps be seen as wise, because no sooner does *B* pay his compliments to *A* and hear them acknowledged as compliments, than he undermines them by implying that *A*'s programme is enjoyable largely by default. In speaking as he does, *B* perhaps demonstrates that he is neither the linguistic nor the cultural dope that he has been made out to be. His action suggests that had *A* behaved in a preferred manner, *B* might have delivered compliments that could be accepted as such. Instead, *A*'s dispreferred actions are matched by a telling dispreferred action from *B*.

Thus, the analysis of two superficially similar telephone calls to radio programme presenters demonstrates that participant reaction and the sequential unfolding of the interaction is a resource that the conversation analyst draws upon in order to determine whether an utterance can, in this case, be described as a compliment. This strategy involves a recognition that a compliment is an interactional achievement, and not simply an assessment containing certain semantically positive adjectives or verbs.

It is worth pointing out, in conclusion, that if the caller were simply incompetent, then his 'compliment' could be described as a 'backhanded' one. Despite the fact that native

speakers of English are familiar with the notion of a 'backhanded' compliment, there is no mention of such a compliment in the work of Manes and Wolfson (1981). The very existence of such a term, however, is suggestive of the interactional difficulty and complexity of complimenting.

A second resource that the conversation analyst draws upon is indexical knowledge. Section 2 of this chapter argued that the references to Roger Cooper's imprisonment and death sentence in Iran were complimentary because indexical knowledge allowed us to relate the events described to admired qualities such as bravery and steadfastness. As Roger Cooper's reactions to the assessments are neither noticeable nor accountable, we can say that they are preferred and that he accepts the assessments as compliments.

Section 2 also argued that those lexical phrases that compare an addressee to someone *who is successful, or talented, or in some way admirable*, such as 'there's something Karen Carpenterish about your voice,' can be compliments, if the indexical circumstances of the utterances support such a view, and if the addressee's reactions display a recognition of the utterance as complimentary. The data base of this thesis contains an example of what is perhaps the most indexical of all compliments, because there is one lexical phrase that every human being has probably used as a compliment at some time or other. This is a phrase which is indexically highly complex, and is none other than, 'She's (just) like my mother.' The phrase has, of course, variations which involve fathers, siblings, spouses, children, in-laws and an ever-widening circle of relatives, friends,



colleagues and acquaintances.

However, the greatest complexity accrues to references to parents, siblings, spouses and children, because they are the people with whom our involvement is most important, intense, prolonged and varied, and of whom our knowledge is most extensive. Hence, while one might assume that, for most people, an utterance such as, 'She's just like my mother,' is fundamentally affectionate and complimentary, it is always necessary to examine the indexical circumstances of this particular lexical phrase in order to determine whether it is treated as a compliment by those participating in the interaction, or whether it reveals some other aspect of the complex mother-child relationship.

The example of one speaker comparing another to her mother comes from a recording of a programme on a local radio station in the United Kingdom. A team of broadcasters had gone to the annual Isle of Wight agricultural show and their programme was recorded in the open air in front of a crowd of visitors to the show. A male broadcaster (A) and a female colleague (B) were joined by a female cookery expert (C). B and C were presenting a recipe for a curry to their radio audience, and to the audience in front of them, and they invited an elderly female visitor, called Nora (D), from the north of England, to join them on stage and to write down the ingredients and the instructions for the recipe.

[RS:C:89:40:2]

- B: ((Reading what D has written)) Two cu oh two cups of medium chopped  
COUPLE OF=it's us southerners=you can't  
[understand us can you]=
- D: [(( )) did you say?]=
- B: =A couple of chopped onions=
- D: =A couple=what's the difference [between a couple and two?]
- B: [That's right ( ) you put]=
- C: =[Two cups]
- D: =[Well it's] the same as one couple=
- B: =[Oo:::h ]=
- C: =[You tell her] You tell her
- D: Right=one [couple ]
- B: [I mean] I I didn't ask you here for an argument Nora=
- D: =There we are=we've done it=
- B: =Aa:::w she's like my mother=
- A: =She's got her [own sort of shorthand] that's what it is=
- C: [ (( laughs )) ]
- A: =It's like you Spag Bol and whatever (.) you know um=
- D: =That's my own [dialect]
- A: [cups ] means couple its [a it's a sort of]=
- D: [couple yus yus]
- A: =it's just an abbreviation=
- B: =Okay I stand corr[ected ]
- D: [its just] your southern lingo ...

The elderly woman ignores the conventions of the genre and behaves instead as though she were in a kitchen among friends and family. As such she displays some of the parental idiosyncrasies that we observe and, often, imitate. The full text of the talk shows that, instead of speaking when addressed by one of the presenters, she delivers the sort of running commentary on activities or events that mothers establish for the benefit of inarticulate infants, or, in their absence, for the cat. Various aspects of Nora's speech and of her interactional style prompt B to suggest that Nora is like her mother. The good-



natured laughter that accompanies the assessment and Nora's response to it indicate that the action and response are treated as preferred, but the highly indexical nature of the utterance makes it difficult to characterize it in a more specific manner. It might well be that *B* is acknowledging an essential aspect her mother's role in the life of their family and allowing others to infer the compliment, but the meaning of the utterance will vary very much from one member of the audience to the other, because all have mothers and all have memories.

Furthermore, while an utterance such as, 'She's just like my mother,' may be complimentary in a large majority of cases, the very similar utterances, 'You're just like your mother,' as said by a husband to a wife, or 'You're just like your father,' as said by a mother to a son, need to be interpreted in the light of their indexical circumstances and of their sequential development. Common sense suggests that in many cases these comparisons will not be complimentary, and Section 2 of this Chapter, 'Compliments and indexicality,' warned of the risk involved in using comparisons as compliments.

Student investigators should therefore be encouraged to ask how they can justify the claims that they make about a given interaction, and discouraged from simply collecting examples of utterances which fit a formula, but which do not enlarge our understanding of the complexity and richness of human interaction. The final section of this chapter will discuss a number of approaches that teachers can adopt in order to promote this objective.

## **5.8 Compliments in the EFL classroom**

There has been an increasing interest recently in using authentic data in the EFL classroom (Carter and McCarthy 1995; Lewis 1993; McCarthy and Carter 1995), though not without some objections (Prodromou 1996). What is surprising, perhaps, about this use of authentic data is that it has taken so long for the argument to be made, because it is not possible to teach EFL for any length of time without having a student observe that the language of the man or woman in the street does not match that of the textbook. In some instances, of course, the teacher rejects the vulgar examples overheard by the student because she considers them to be of no value to the former, but with the rapid development of satellite broadcasting and computer based communications, students are gaining access to an increasing number of varieties of English, and the language models to which advanced learners are exposed in the classroom can no longer safely be based on the intuitions of the textbook writer. This has long been recognised in certain areas of ESP (Dudley-Evans 1987; Swales 1985, 1990), and progress has also been made in the study of service encounters in a variety of genres (Firth 1995; Ventola 1987).

In mundane conversation, however, the research of Scotton and Bernstein (1988), which suggested that there is a mismatch between textbook models of asking a stranger for directions and what people in the street actually say, attracted interest and comment, but not a great deal of imitation. It is, after all, more convenient and more productive, as Holmes and Brown (1987:524) observe, to collect data in experimental situations or by means of the ethnographic method than to tape record, transcribe, and



analyze authentic data. However, the preceding six sections of this chapter have argued that interesting and revealing data are not hard to find, because sources are plentiful.

There are many ways in which the type of data and the methods exemplified in those six sections could be used in the EFL or applied linguistics classroom, and this thesis will describe three of them briefly. As a teacher of ESP and EAP, I notice, in particular, that most textbooks are based on the writer's intuition, not on linguistic or applied linguistic research in the field covered by the textbook. In English for Economics, for example, the two best known texts, Jordan and Nixon (1986) and Yates (1989), teach the reader little about the language of economics as revealed, for example, by Bramki and Williams (1984), Henderson (1982), Henderson and Hewings (1987), Mead and Henderson (1983), or Tadros (1985). Instead, these texts are designed for the benefit of the EFL teacher with little or no knowledge of economics and they provide reading comprehension passages and exercises that the teacher can deal with confidently. Much the same appears to be true of textbooks for students of business and management (Brieger and Comfort 1992; Ellis and Johnson 1994; Guffey 1995), as Williams (1988) has pointed out. It is noticeable, furthermore, that complimenting and other forms of affective or persuasive language receive little attention, despite the importance that is attached, in business, to achieving successful interaction.

There is, therefore, a gap in the literature, and filling it is an attractive proposition because it is the desire of most EFL or ESP learners to interact successfully with other speakers of English. Paying compliments, however, as Brown and Levinson (1987:66-

67) note, can be interactionally difficult, particularly when they are of the direct, formulaic sort ('I like your suit') collected by Manes and Wolfson (1981) and their followers. Furthermore, if a student is taught about complimenting by someone who has read the work of Wolfson and Manes (1981) or Holmes and Brown (1987), that student might not only have a limited view of how complimenting takes place in English, but she might also run the risk of being restricted interactionally by that knowledge, and of appearing to be a 'cultural dope' (Garfinkel 1967:70).

It seems safer and more interesting from the student's point of view, therefore, to start to understand some of the ways in which *indirect* compliments are paid in English and to collect examples of the ways in which they are realized. This thesis has briefly described three of those ways (relying on indexical knowledge, and using lexical phrases and negative constructions), and advanced level ESP learners, for instance, can be given examples of compliments in negative constructions, to begin with, and invited to discuss them and to collect additional examples from a tape-recordable source such as a TV programme. They can also be invited to compare this formulation of compliments in British English with complimenting in a local variety of English or in their native language. They can be encouraged to identify additional ways in which compliments are paid, particularly in genres that might be of future importance to them, and encouraged to believe that they can do so. The emphasis, therefore, is not on teaching formulas, as it is in Holmes and Brown (1987), but on the richness and diversity of language use, and on the fact that it is waiting to be revealed.

However, before moving on to the second of the three ways in which authentic



conversational data might be used in the classroom, it is perhaps worth noting that the teacher of business English who analyzes tape recordings of discussions of business issues, recorded from satellite broadcasts, can find much of interest about the ways in which criticisms, complaints and dissatisfaction are expressed indirectly, because they are possibly of greater importance to the student than compliments. The students can also benefit from learning how actors constitute preferred and dispreferred responses to such actions. This can be shown by selecting suitable examples, transcribing them, listening to the interaction, letting the students see what dispreferred responses have in common, and then having students analyze and discuss carefully selected examples. It might be argued that such examples are hard to come by, but the recent conflict between Dr Mahatir Mohammed and George Soros produced some sharp exchanges on television between representatives of the different parties. Although such an exercise is quite demanding for students, it is essential that advanced level students are exposed to authentic data if they are to have confidence in their ability to interact successfully with native speakers.

The second application of the use of conversational data in the classroom is as a research exercise on a teacher training course. Classroom researchers have been showing teachers how they can involve themselves and their students in manageable, practical projects for a number of years (Edge and Richards 1993), and the collection of compliments is a very suitable activity. Ironically, this is exactly what Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Holmes and Brown (1987) and others have recommended from a sociolinguistic standpoint. The difference, of course, is that they were handicapped by their methodology, with the result that the revelations of the first study were

repeated by most subsequent studies. The conversation analytic approach, however, not only promises a greater variety of data, but also demonstrates the fact that negotiation is an essential part of any interaction. Aston (1994:80), whose study of thanking is based on tape-recorded data, makes this same point. He argues that

learners need to be able to jointly negotiate specific instances, not merely to recite underlying 'scripts' of varying complexities, be they situationally or sequentially conceived.

Aston's (1994) work on thanking is a reminder of the fact that a study of compliments in naturally occurring tape-recorded data can lead students to the study of other forms of interaction, dealing perhaps with complaints or apologies, and that it can encourage them to compare their findings with research done in an ethnographic or experimental manner (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989). This is suitable work for a teacher training course, because a relatively small amount of naturally occurring data can be sufficient to raise interesting questions or to make certain valuable comparisons. This is analogous to what Carter and McCarthy (1995:155) say of their study of the grammar of spoken English.

The patchy, confusing, and often inadequate treatment of the grammar of spoken language in published resources may turn out to be a cue for imaginative discovery and problem-solving work in the grammar class. One only needs an initial curiosity, some real data, and the feeling that there is a lot to be discovered to get started.

In collecting data, the student can follow the procedure adopted in this thesis and can record, for example, a talk show on television, and replay and examine sections of the



programme in search of interactions that appear to constitute compliments, or whatever other interactional forms might be of interest. Students at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam are encouraged to video tape programmes that they like, so that sections that are interactionally difficult or surprising can be played and discussed in class. A popular choice is the Oprah Winfrey show, because many of the issues discussed are of relevance to the largely female student body. It is a show that they are prepared to listen to attentively. They are ready to focus on the language used as well as the issues raised, and the language chosen can, of course, be language with a distinct interactional objective. Given that the format of the show involves women supporting women in various ways and in various contexts, the programmes are rich in examples of 'seen but unnoticed' interactional activity to which the teacher can draw attention.

I have found it useful to combine this listening with excerpts from Tannen's (1990,1992) popular works, because they can shed additional light on the discussions. Her books have the advantage, also, of being broken up into short sections and so, very often, I can quickly find a couple of pages that relate usefully to one of the television topics. *The students with whom I use this material have only two hours of English a week, and so I transcribe much of the relevant talk on their behalf, but leave gaps in small, interesting sections for them to transcribe. However, for advanced students with more time to spend on language, regular exercises in transcription can be very instructive, as Chapter One, Section Five argued.*

A third way in which this work can be used is on undergraduate courses in language

and linguistics. Conversation analysis is already a major part of Levinson's (1983) study of pragmatics, and Garfinkel (1967), Schutz (1962, 1964) and Sacks (1992a, 1992b) are academically respectable and demanding texts. The linking of conversation analysis to its ethnomethodological roots (Maynard and Clayman 1991) gives rise to a much more coherent field of study and to a form of analysis that is theoretically grounded, and that no longer need accept the criticism that conversation analysis is a form without a substance (Coulon 1995:64-70). The academic appeal of this subject is considerable, because, on the one hand, it necessitates a study of conversation analysis's theoretical basis in phenomenology and ethnomethodology, while, on the other hand, it involves the student in the work of practical data collection and analysis. In between, the student can find examples of inspired scholarship, such as Pollner's (1975) linking of the 'poison oracle' of the Azande with recordings of mundane discussions in a local traffic court.

The appeal of the subject also derives from the multidisciplinary influences that are evident in the work of Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b) and that inspire the reader to turn to anthropology at one moment and to literature the next. Moerman's (1992) memoir of Sacks is suggestive of what one can find in Sacks' work.

Among the books that Harvey talked about and had me read were ethnographies, such as Gluckman's *The Judicial Process Among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (1955), Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (1950); monographs on behavioral ethology, such as Schaller's *The Mountain Gorilla* (1963); biblical studies, such as Tur-Sinai's *The Book of Job* (1957); literary criticism, including Bakhtian, I.A. Richards, and Auerbach's *Mimesis*, classical studies such as Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) and Jones's *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (1962); analytic philosophy, such as Nelson Goodman's *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (1954); the *Oxford English Dictionary*, works of Franz Kafka, and the novels and prefaces of Henry



James. I list them with some happy sense that this group, our assembled conference, is the first I have encountered who might hear this set of readings as having coherence, mutual resonances, and some common thrusts.

Thanks, in large part, to Levinson (1983) and Atkinson and Heritage (1984a), conversation analysis has begun to influence EFL and ESL and this connection provides an important purpose for its practical analyses. That purpose, of course, is to show the *non-native speaker of English* how spoken interaction in English is constituted, and to identify the interactional difficulties that arise in interaction between the native speaker and the non-native speaker. The influence of conversation analysis extends also to first language teaching (Mehan 1979; Seedhouse 1994) and to communication studies (Firth 1995). A form of conversation analysis that is reinvigorated by its ethnomethodological roots, as Maynard and Clayman (1991) argue it should be, is a stronger, more coherent, and more effective discipline and it is one that should consequently exercise greater academic appeal.

A knowledge of the ethnomethodological roots of conversational interaction is of considerable value to the teacher. It enables that person to use authentic conversational data in the classroom and to explain the workings of compliments to EFL and ESP students who want to know how to interact effectively with other speakers of English; and it enables her to help teacher trainees who wish to extend their own understanding of spoken interaction, to engage in classroom research, and to learn how to use authentic data in the classroom. It is equally valuable to the college or university teacher whose undergraduate students seek challenging and stimulating reading in a field of study that has a sound theoretical basis and important

practical applications. Nothing, after all, is more important than understanding how human beings interact, and the possibility of shedding a little light on this complex process is a great stimulus to research.

### ***5.9 Summary and Conclusion***

I became familiar with the sociolinguistic literature on complimenting in the late 1980s and I found it immediately appealing. It was clear and simple, and it was obviously true that actors do say such things as, 'That's a nice bag.' It was also appealing from a pedagogical point of view, because the extensive literature suggested that it was academically sound, and because it appeared to have applications on a range of courses in EFL and applied linguistics. It was easy to agree with Holmes and Brown's (1987:535) observation that

the formulaic nature of compliments - their syntactic and lexical predictability - makes them attractive ESL teaching material and provides an easy solution to the problem of how to express a speech act in English.

That agreement, however, was short lived and it lasted only until I began to listen to tape recorded examples of naturally occurring talk. My objective had been to replicate Manes and Wolfson's (1981) study using British English data and to compare that with the American data. However, the use of tape-recorded data made it impossible to ignore the surrounding text and, in particular, the response to the compliment. Too many instances of ambiguity arose and it became necessary to consider the question of how one determines whether a given utterance is or is not a compliment. As the sociolinguistic literature had focused on the collection of isolated speech acts, rather



than on a collection of episodes of interaction, it could offer no answer to that question.

Prominent in the literature on complimenting, however, was one researcher, Pomerantz (1978), who had adopted a conversation analytic approach to the subject. Her work suggested that the concept of preference would offer an effective means of determining whether an utterance was or was not a compliment. As a sociologist, a student of Sacks and Schegloff, and as someone writing in the 1970s, however, she possibly felt that an explanation of preference was not necessary, because she defined the notion in vague terms and concentrated instead on exemplifying the ways in which actors handle two conflicting preferences: the preference for agreement and the preference for avoiding self-praise.

In the absence of a clear criterion in the work of Pomerantz (1978), it was necessary to turn to other literature in conversation analysis for an explanation of preference. However, as this thesis has shown, that literature provides a number of partial explanations which are effective with data of a restricted type, but which do not offer a criterion that can be applied in all cases. As the major works in conversation analysis did not provide an answer, the search for a comprehensive solution led gradually back to the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis, and it became apparent that the ethnomethodological literature alone could explain the methods that actors were using in constituting preferred and dispreferred actions.

This thesis has attempted to show that the 'ethno' methods of indexicality, reflexivity,

the documentary method of interpretation, and the reciprocity of perspectives are methods that actors employ in their efforts to impose sense on the world around them. The collected lectures of Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b) illustrated the workings of these methods and their relationship to the concept of preference. The one hundred and sixty lectures provide ample evidence that the preferred action or response is one that is neither noticeable nor accountable, and that the dispreferred action is noticeable, accountable, and possibly sanctionable. With this simple and effective criterion, it is possible to examine the development of an interactional sequence and to see what understandings of prior actions and utterances are displayed in subsequent actions and utterances. The conversation analyst's interpretation of any exchange is the outcome of her analysis of the sequential unfolding of the conversation, and that analysis is based on her knowledge of the 'ethno' methods that actors employ in interaction.

The final chapter of the thesis has applied this knowledge and this mode of analysis to an examination of compliments, and has shown that while actors do use 'NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ to pay compliments,' they also use a great number of other forms, most of which are 'seen but unnoticed' by researchers in this field. It has argued that although a knowledge of the formulaic compliment is valuable for the student, it ought not to occupy that person for very long. Instead, advanced learners should be challenged to reveal the more subtle, varied, complex, and satisfying ways in which speakers of English compliment one another. The thesis has proposed that students can achieve this objective by employing a conversation analytic approach to the collection and study of data. The thesis has endeavoured to show, by way of its



data extracts, that conversation analysis can also be fun, because it can reveal what our friends and colleagues are actually up to. More importantly, it has attempted to demonstrate that language teachers would benefit from a knowledge of ethnomethodology, because it believes, as Hilbert (1992:219) does, that

Whatever future developments in ethnomethodology reveal about social life, they are certain to be counterintuitive, revolutionary in their potential for human understanding, and empirically grounded.

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